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Heidi Betts

HEIDI BETTS

FORTUNE'S FORBIDDEN WOMAN

!For Mom—because it's been a while. I love you

Special thanks and acknowledgment are given

to Heidi Betts for her contribution

.to the DAKOTA FORTUNES miniseries

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Epilogue

One

**Thank you for dinner,” Maya Blackstone said as she fitted her “
key into the lock of her downtown Sioux Falls town house. She
twisted the key and then the knob, opening the door a crack
.before turning back to Brad McKenzie**

**It was dark outside, but the yellow glow of the porch light
.reflected his tall frame, chestnut hair and handsome face**

**You’re welcome,” he said, offering a small smile as his hand “
stroked down her arm, left bare by the sleeveless knit top she
”?was wearing. “Aren’t you going to invite me in**

**Gooseflesh broke out along her skin, making her shiver. She
shouldn’t have been surprised by his suggestion. They’d been
dating for almost a year now, and Brad was one of the nicest guys
she’d ever met. It was only natural that their relationship would
begin to move in a more physical, intimate direction. Lord knew
.he’d been pushing for it for months now**

**Not aggressively, and not in any way that would make her feel
pressured, but she wasn’t stupid. She knew what all the little
touches and caresses meant. She also knew that most couples
who’d been seeing each other as long as she and Brad had would
.already be sleeping together**

And there was no reason she shouldn't go to bed with him. He was kind, good-looking, successful and treated her like a princess. She was even attracted to him

?So what was her problem? What was she waiting for

Taking a deep breath, she steeled her nerves and made her decision

Of course." Pushing open the front door, she stepped inside and " flipped on the light that illuminated the small entryway. She set her purse on the decorative bench she kept against the wall and headed for the kitchen, leaving Brad to close the door and follow along. He'd been inside her house often enough to know his way around and make himself at home

Would you like something to drink?" she asked, going to the " refrigerator to see what she had to offer. "Iced tea or a glass of ".wine. I could make some coffee

He came up behind her, standing so close she could feel the heat of his body at her back

Wine would be good," he murmured in a low voice, taking the " opportunity to rub her shoulders

Fighting the urge to shrug away from his hold, she grabbed the open bottle of chardonnay from the top shelf of the refrigerator, then opened a nearby cupboard to retrieve two glasses. She walked around the corner into the living room, breaking Brad's hold on her but knowing he was close on her heels

They lowered themselves onto the overstuffed, floral-patterned sofa. Maya sat forward, setting the glasses on the coffee table while she popped the cork and poured a generous amount of the fragrant liquid for each of them

She turned to hand one of the glasses to Brad, taking a deep breath to keep from shifting farther away. He was sitting close,

his thigh pressing along hers, his shoulder brushing her own as he
.took the wine

This was ridiculous, she chastised herself. What was she afraid
?of? What was she waiting for

Brad sipped his wine while she drank hers a bit more forcefully,
then set her empty glass on the table in front of them. Turning,
she smiled and settled against his side, both of them leaning into
.the soft back of the sofa

His brows lifted, and it took a second for his arm to tighten
.around her

She didn't blame him for being surprised, since she wasn't usually
.the one to make the first move

Usually? Try never. She had never made the first move with Brad.
.A part of her couldn't believe she was doing it now

But a year was long enough. She wanted to be with Brad. She
wanted to be normal, have a normal relationship. And if things
were ever going to move forward with them, become more
serious, she needed to get over these intimacy issues she seemed
.to have

Tipping her head back, she silently invited him to kiss her. An
.invitation he wasted no time accepting

Despite her reservations, she had to admit he was a good kisser.
Even she had no trouble recognizing that aspect of his
.personality

His mouth moved over hers smoothly, his lips warm and firm. He
caressed her shoulders, then her arms, his hands sliding around
.to her back

It felt good, enjoyable, and she thought they really might make it
.this time

With a moan he pulled her closer, deepening the kiss and pressing their bodies together so that she could feel the clear .sign of his arousal

Her stomach clenched, but not with desire. Nerves flared to life in her bloodstream, her muscles growing tense, her breathing .growing labored as panic set in

Dammit. She stiffened, whimpering partly in fear and partly in .aggravation as she put out her arms and shoved away

.Brad blinked, his chest heaving, stunned by her sudden retreat

I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head and shifting back as far as" .she could against the arm of the couch

Why, why did she keep doing this? Why couldn't she act like a regular twenty-five-year-old woman and sleep with her boyfriend without being plagued by so many doubts? Without seeing his face when she closed her eyes, and hearing his voice thundering .in her ears

.Damn, damn, damn

Brad blew out a breath and ran his fingers through his hair, frustration rolling off of him in waves. "I know. You're sorry, but ".you can't

The words held no accusation or anger whatsoever, which only .made her feel worse

When he got to his feet, she jumped up and followed him across .the room toward the front door

I really am sorry," she told him, feeling guilty and miserable, but" .not knowing what else to say

What else could she say? She was sorry, even though she couldn't .offer him any more of an explanation than that

At the door he paused with his hand on the knob and turned to meet her gaze. She thought he must surely be entertaining

thoughts of chewing her out at this point, but his hazel eyes
.remained soft and gentle

I know you are. So am I.” He lifted a hand to tuck a loose strand “
of hair behind her ear. “I told you I wouldn’t push you, Maya, and
I meant it. I’m becoming a pro at cold showers,” he added with a
”.tiny lift to his lips, “but no pressure

Stepping onto the front stoop, he turned back to kiss her cheek
.before walking slowly back to his car

She watched him drive away, then closed the door and banged
her head lightly on the cool wood a few times. Even she was
getting tired of this, so she could just imagine how poor Brad was
feeling. She only wished there was something she could do about
the anxieties that were turning memories from the past into a
.full-blown phobia

It was all his fault. She hadn’t seen her step-brother in months,
but still Creed Fortune somehow managed to be the plague of her
.existence

Ever since she was a little girl, when she and her mother had
moved into the Fortune Estate so Patricia could act as nanny to
Nash Fortune’s four young children, Creed had been nothing but
cold to her. Even after Nash and her mother had fallen in love and
married, making Nash’s kids Maya’s new stepsiblings, she had
.still gotten along with the others better than she had with Creed

It was easy to be friends with Skylar, who was only a year older
than Maya. They’d had a lot in common and had played together
.from the time they were little

Eliza had been six years older and not much interested in playing
role model to another girl other than her own half sister, though
she’d always been nice to Maya. And Blake—Skylar’s brother and
Nash’s son from his second marriage to Trina Watters—had
.thankfully been kind to her

But Case and Creed Fortune—sons from Nash's first marriage to his now deceased college sweetheart, Elizabeth—were several years older than Maya and had always treated her like an outsider. They'd ignored her and made her feel unwelcome in .what was supposed to be her own home

She'd never really been comfortable living in that big house with so many people who were technically her family but felt more like .strangers

In addition, Maya had always been the ugly stepsister. She was plain and quiet, and not a true Fortune. She was simply the shy, unremarkable girl who'd shown up one day with the new, live-in nanny and ended up a sister when their parents fell in love. But .that didn't mean any of the real Fortune children had to like her

Pushing away from the door, she dragged herself back to the living room to collect the wineglasses and nearly empty bottle. When she reached the kitchen, she put Brad's glass upside down over one of the spokes of the dishwasher basket, then poured the end of the wine into her own glass, watching the last few drops .drip, drip, drip as her head began to pound

And after all of the insecurities and loneliness, she'd still been crazy enough to develop a childhood crush on Creed almost from the moment she met him. He'd been handsome, older...and so .sophisticated

He was still handsome, older and sophisticated...but she'd long .ago given up on winning his heart

Honestly, she'd have had better luck attracting the attention of a fence post. No matter how often she followed him around or how many cow-eyed glances she'd sent him, he'd never given her the time of day. If anything, he'd only grown colder and more distant .the longer her crush had lingered on

It was highly humiliating. And what made matters even worse was .the fact that she apparently still wasn't over him

?Was she in love with him

.She didn't think so. She certainly didn't want to be

**But she also couldn't seem to get him out of her brain. He swirled
.in there, making her neurotic and half-insane**

**She was mature enough to realize that the case of puppy love
she'd entertained as a kid had been nothing more than a sick case
of hero worship. Unfortunately, that hero worship had since
worked itself into a maddening and unhealthy obsession with
.Creed Fortune**

**Which was hopeless and futile, considering he'd never shown the
least bit of interest in her as a woman. He'd never shown the
.least bit of interest in her, period**

**Yet he still managed to intrude on her self-confidence, her
.sexuality and her relationship with Brad**

**With a growl Maya threw back the last of the wine, added her own
glass to the dishwasher basket, then slammed the appliance door
closed. She swore, if Creed were standing in front of her right this
.minute, she'd be sorely tempted to slap him**

**Taking a deep breath, she turned on her heel and headed for the
stairs. What she needed was a hot shower and a solid eight hours
.of sleep**

**What she didn't need was this flood of doubts and frustrations.
For God's sake, her life was already complicated enough without
.adding a lukewarm romance and painful memories to the mix**

**Instead of worrying about her love life, she ought to be concerned
.about her mother**

**Patricia had been missing for six weeks now. No one had a clue
where she was or what had caused her to leave. All they knew
.was that one day she was there and the next she wasn't**

Poor Nash was beside himself, frantic and confused, not knowing
.what had driven Patricia away, but desperate to find her

Maya was equally upset, and couldn't imagine why her mother
would have taken off the way she did. True, Patricia had seemed
somewhat distracted over the past few months, but Maya had
.never expected it to lead to anything like this

Her mother's disappearance was the main reason she'd been out
with Brad tonight. Nash had immediately hired private detectives
to try to track down Patricia, so there was very little Maya could
do except wait and worry. Thoughts of her mother had her
completely preoccupied, even during work days, when she should
be concentrating on educating the young minds of her grade-
.school students

And because Brad was kind and considerate and thoughtful, he
understood what she was going through and wanted to help
however he could—mainly by keeping her busy with dinners out,
.long drives, even the occasional cultural events

It was one more reason she cared for Brad and was so angry with
herself for not being able to take their relationship to the next
.level

She was halfway up the stairs and still steaming when the phone
rang. With a grumble she turned around and moved to answer the
kitchen extension rather than race the rest of the way up the
.steps to her bedroom

.Hello?" she all but snapped"

Maya?" a deep male voice replied, as though the caller wasn't "
".sure she was the one who'd answered the phone. "It's Creed

She knew who it was. If there was one voice she could identify
.over all others on the planet, it was Creed Fortune's

.What do you want, Creed?" she asked none too politely"

Of course she already knew. He'd been calling on a regular basis
.to check on her ever since her mother went missing

Why he bothered, Maya couldn't fathom. He certainly hadn't
.given a fig about her the past thirteen years he'd known her

I just wanted to see how you're holding up. The detectives Nash "
hired haven't turned up anything on your mom yet, but I'm sure
".they will soon

How am I holding up?" she repeated, her annoyance with both "
him and herself flaring to life again and coming out in the razor
sharpness of her tone. "How am I holding up? Oh, I'm fine. Just
".peachy. Damn you, Creed

Her fingers tightened on the handset and she began to pace back
.and forth across the kitchen, as far as the spiral cord would allow

This is all your fault. You've ruined my chances of ever having a "
normal relationship with a man, ever sleeping with a man. You
blamed a seventeen-year-old girl for being attacked by her
boyfriend and called me a slut. You're the reason I can't have a
"!normal relationship, and I hate you for that

Her tirade ended with her voice at least one octave higher than
usual. Without giving him a chance to respond, she slammed the
.phone down, muttered a low curse, and marched off to bed

It was almost midnight and the windows were dark, but Creed
Fortune couldn't have cared less. He stomped up the steps to
Maya's town house and pounded on the door with the side of his
.fist

To hell with the doorbell. To hell with the fact that she was
probably sound asleep. He wanted to talk to her, and he wanted
.to do it now

Where did she get off telling him he'd ruined her for ever going to
?bed with a man

She sure hadn't had any trouble attracting the opposite sex in high school, not once she'd begun to fill out with those soft, feminine curves and grown into her striking half-Yankton-Sioux features. The long, black hair, chocolate-brown doe eyes and ripe little body had had boys panting after her like a mare in heat

He pounded again, louder and longer this time. Across the street a dog barked, and inside he thought he heard movement. A second later a light flicked on and the door swung open

He took a moment to hope she'd checked the peephole first, then rational thought spun away as he took in her tousled hair, drowsy eyes and the short, faded nightshirt that seemed to cling in all the right places

With a tired sigh, she leaned against the edge of the door and let her lashes flutter to half-mast. "Now what do you want, Creed? In case you hadn't noticed, it's the middle of the night and some people are trying to sleep

"?At least we know you're sleeping alone, don't we"

A spark flashed in her narrowed eyes. "Go to hell," she said, and made a move to slam the door in his face

He stuck out his booted foot, blocking the motion. It didn't keep her from pressing forward and throwing her body against the heavy wood

Get your foot out of the door, Creed. Go bother someone else "and let me go back to bed

He added his knee and upper body to the battle, causing her to grunt as he pushed her back and forced his way into the house. Kicking the door closed behind him, he leaned against it and crossed his arms over his chest. Maya did the same, retreating several steps until she'd put what he was sure she felt was a safe distance between them

Adding forced entry to your résumé these days?" she asked " .belligerently

He shrugged, keeping his face blank even as heat started to pump through his blood and pool near the region of his groin. Dammit, ?why did she have to be so beautiful

She was his stepsister, for God's sake. Not related by blood in any .way, but related through the marriage of his father to her mother

No matter how you cut it, she was forbidden fruit, and he had no .business lusting after her. No business at all

Never mind that he'd secretly been doing just that since she'd hit puberty. He was ten years too old for her, and supposed to play .the part of big brother, but still he'd wanted her

Why did she have to grow up in so many interesting places? Why ?couldn't she have remained a plain and gawky child forever

Tamping down his errant thoughts, he kicked away from the door and headed toward her. "If I have to," he said in answer to her .question

What are you doing, Creed?" She continued her backward " shuffle, occasionally bumping into the wall or glancing behind her "?to make sure the path was clear. "Why are you here

.Do I need a reason?" he asked, never breaking eye contact"

Yes. You do. Have you found out something about my mother? If " ".so, tell me and then get out. Otherwise, just get out

They both stopped moving. One corner of his mouth lifted in a humorless half grin. Since when had she become so good at telling him off and ordering him around? It certainly was a change .from the quiet, meek girl she'd been when they were kids

No, nothing about your mother. The private investigators are " still working on it. I'm here because of what you said on the ".phone

Her expression flickered, the hard, angry glint in her eyes being replaced by wary uncertainty. He even thought he saw a touch of pink color her high cheekbones

"I ruined you for other men?" he pressed. "Just what the hell is that supposed to mean"

She flinched. A small, almost imperceptible motion, and the only sign that she was uncomfortable with the topic of conversation. But he caught it, and some part of him reveled in his ability to shake her

Nothing." Her voice was low and she gave one quick, jerky shake of her head. "It doesn't mean anything. I was tired and worried about my mom. I didn't know what I was saying

.Valiant effort, but he didn't buy it

He took another step forward. "Guess that means Brad isn't getting any, huh? Nearly a year of sniffing around your skirts, and he gets nothing for his trouble. Poor, pathetic loser

Her chin went up at that, her shoulders squaring as she straightened her spine. "Look who's talking. I may not be sleeping with Brad, he may not be 'getting any,' but at least he's a gentleman. He would never barge into my house and corner me like this. He would never accuse me of being a tramp, or make me feel like one the way you did just because a boy sweet-talked me into his car when I was seventeen and then attacked me

It was his turn to flinch, but only on the inside. He remembered that night as though it were yesterday. Stumbling upon Maya and her current boyfriend—or at least one of the boys she'd been hanging out with quite a bit that summer, ever since the opposite sex had begun to take notice of her fine feminine form...Taking notice of the tell-tale rocking of the shiny Trans Am and the noises that were emanating from inside...and then realizing Maya's cries weren't of the pleasurable variety

He remembered the fury he'd felt as he'd opened the driver's side door and yanked the boy out by the scruff of his neck. The kid—some varsity football jock with a letterman jacket—had been lucky to get away with only a few scrapes and bruises, because Creed .had sincerely considered killing the little bastard

As it was, he'd given the jerk a beating he wouldn't soon forget. Then he'd dragged Maya home, filling her ears with lectures and .invectives the whole way

That's why you won't sleep with Brad McKenzie?" He made a " scoffing sound, his mouth twisting into a wry smirk. "He must not be very persuasive. I could have you begging for it in two seconds ".flat

Any intimidation or discomfort Maya might have been feeling flew out the window at his cocky remark. Her brown eyes glittered dangerously and every muscle in her body went rigid. She'd been backed up until her calves hit the edge of the sofa, but now she .took a single, confident step forward

Oh, really. And just how would you manage that? Twist my arm " until I told you what you wanted to hear, whether it was true or "?not

Her words were like gasoline thrown on an already raging brush fire. The low-level desire humming through his system suddenly .ratcheted up several notches to full, mind-numbing throttle

He reached out, taking her by the wrist and tugging her against .his chest

".No," he breathed. "Like this"

.And then he took her mouth with his

Two

F or a moment Maya froze, so stunned her mind went blank and her body refused to move. But Creed's lips were firm, his body hot, his arms like steel bands where he held her tight against him

Her eyes slid closed and her fingers curled into his shoulders, kneading like a kitten. She moaned

How long had she dreamed of this? Of having him kiss her, hold her, want her

Forever, that's how long. Since she and her mother had moved into the Fortune Estate and she'd first been introduced to the brooding, much older young man who towered over and intimidated her. Even as a shy, somewhat awkward girl, she'd known her own heart, and her heart had wanted Creed Fortune

But she'd never truly believed she could have him. Not when he took every opportunity to make it clear she was nothing but a thorn in his side. An uninvited sibling, forced upon him by an unexpected romance between his father and her mother

Now, though...now she knew she'd been wrong. He'd done a good job of hiding it, but apparently he shared her feelings and wanted her as much as she'd always wanted him

His kiss was sweltering, raising her temperature and causing her to break out in beads of perspiration. He worked her mouth as if she was a decadent dessert and he couldn't get enough

Tongues tangled, teeth nipped and clashed. She pressed herself close to his tall frame, letting her breasts brush the solid wall of his chest, the insistent bulge of his arousal nudge the space between her legs

This was better than anything she'd ever experienced. Better than any other kiss she'd shared with any other man. Better even than all the times over the past year that she'd tried to relax

enough to make love with Brad, but ended up pulling back at the
.last minute

It was better, she knew, because it was Creed. And with him she
.wasn't afraid, she wasn't shy, she wasn't self-conscious

With him she didn't recall his long-ago accusation that she acted
like a slut, but instead remembered all the times she'd wanted
.him, lusted after him, dreamed about him

.And now, finally, she could have him

Her arms tightened around his neck, her fingers playing in the
ends of his short, dark brown hair. She whimpered and wiggled in
.his hold, striving desperately for something she couldn't name

He pulled away, chest heaving, breathing ragged. His blue eyes
.glittered as he held her gaze

Muttering a heartfelt curse, he shook his head, then swooped in
.to take her mouth again

This time he didn't settle for just kissing. His hands clasped her
waist and swung her around, manipulating her as easily as a
tailor's mannequin. Without breaking the contact of their lips and
tongues, he walked her backward through the living room and
.hall, up the staircase and into her bedroom

She didn't stop to wonder how he knew his way through her
house or which bedroom was hers; she was simply relieved by his
focus and excellent navigational skills. And she clung to him,
wrapping her legs around his waist halfway up the stairs to aid
.his progress

He carried her into the room and straight to the bed, laying her on
top of the covers, rumped from where she'd thrown them off
.when he'd woken her with his pounding

Her nightshirt bunched to her waist, the rough denim of his jeans
rubbing against the soft skin of her inner thighs. His hands
sneaked over her hips and waist, beneath the hem of the shirt,

pushing it higher as his fingers moved toward the swells of her
.breasts

His lips caressed her chin and jawline, brushing the lobe of her
ear before trailing down her throat in a series of nips and licks.
When she felt a gentle pressure beneath her arms, she lifted
them willingly above her head and let him pull the nightshirt off
.entirely

The cool evening air blew across her naked breasts and torso, and
.she quickly lowered her hands to cover herself

".Don't"

Creed's fingers circled her wrists like manacles, slowly tugging
.her hands away to reveal her nudity to his hungry gaze

Don't hide," he said again, his voice low and strained. "I want to "
".see you, all of you

He ran the side of his thumb over the tip of one breast, grinning
.when it puckered and swelled beneath his ministrations

She sucked in a breath of air, her back arching into his touch. Her
face felt flushed, her entire body a wriggling mass of fever-hot
nerve endings, even as she fought not to let her natural tendency
.toward embarrassment take over

He had her hands pinned above her head, the rest of her pinned
by his weight and bulk. And the look in his eyes was that of a
.hungry wolf—fierce, predatory, determined

Lovely," he murmured, then swooped in to lick a tight, budded "
.nipple

She gasped, her fingers clenching into fists above where he held
her arms down. He licked the other nipple, just a quick, light
.swipe, before settling in with more thorough, undivided attention

His tongue rasped like sandpaper along her sensitive nerve
endings. He turned her flesh hot with his mouth, then cool with

the soft hush of his breath. After creating a world of sensual devastation at one breast, he moved to the other and did it all over again

”.When he lifted his head, he was grinning. “Like I said, lovely

His fingers loosened from her wrists, but she didn’t bother attempting to lower her arms. She didn’t have the strength, even if she’d wanted to. She simply lay there like a rag doll, depleted of energy or the will to move

Still smiling, he skimmed the underside of her arms, the sides of her breasts, her waist, until he reached the top of her high-cut bikini panties. They were nothing special, just plain lavender cotton. But then, she hadn’t known anyone would be seeing them when she’d dressed for bed a few hours ago

Her choice of undergarments didn’t seem to bother Creed, though. He brushed his lips around her navel and along the waistband of the panties, then slowly began to drag them off

A flutter of self-consciousness rippled in her belly, and she had to curl her fingers into the sheets to keep from covering herself again or trying to wiggle away

If Creed noticed her sudden bout of discomfort, he didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he kept his gaze locked on the dark triangle at the apex of her thighs that he was revealing inch by agonizing inch. He pushed the panties down her legs, slipping them over her feet and letting them fall to the floor beside the bed

A moment later he pushed to his feet and straightened, all six feet, two inches looming above her

For a second Maya thought he meant to leave...leave her there, naked and flushed, and walk away. But then his arms lifted and his fingers began to deftly release the line of buttons at the front of his shirt

One by one, he slipped them through their holes, and little by little his chest became exposed. The bronzed skin. The firm muscles. The light sprinkling of dark hair

Maya's mouth went dry and she had trouble breathing. He was so beautiful. Tall, athletic, sculpted like some sort of Greek god, or the epitome of the perfect man every woman fantasized about. He was certainly her idea of the perfect man

Tugging the tails of his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans, he released the last couple buttons before shrugging out of the shirt and letting it drop to the floor. He started to kick off his boots, at the same time unzipping his trousers

He pushed everything, jeans and underwear, down his legs and off. But instead of leaving them in a pile on the floor, he withdrew a rear pocket, pulled out his wallet, then dug out a small plastic square. Dropping the clothes, he stepped intently back to the bed in all his naked glory

He was the first man she'd ever seen completely nude, but for once, she wasn't flushed with embarrassment. She was...awed

Amazing didn't quite cover it. Neither did fabulous, marvelous, or any of the other two hundred adjectives that flitted through her mind. A few of her more precocious students might say hubba-hubba, and that came close

His shoulders were broad, his waist flat and tapering down to narrow hips, his legs long and well-muscled. But it was what hung between those legs that held her rapt attention

Admittedly, her experience of such things was limited. Limited, ha! Verging on nonexistent, was more like it. But even so, she was familiar with the basics of the male anatomy, and in her somewhat biased opinion, Creed was a most impressive specimen

Before she had a chance to look her fill, he was stretching out above her, covering her from head to toe. The hair on his legs and

chest tickled, but she didn't laugh. She was too distracted by the .rigid length of his erection rubbing her in all the right places

His fingers drifted over her temples, threading through her hair to hold her steady while he planted light, butterfly kisses on either side of her mouth. First one corner, then the other before he took her mouth for a slow, luxurious exploration. He made her feel like a particularly decadent sweet he wanted to take his time with and .really enjoy

While he continued to kiss her deeply, his hands traveled down her body, one pausing to toy with the tip of her breast, the other sliding lower. Past her waist, over the curve of her buttock, and .down her thigh until he reached the bend of her knee

He lifted her leg, bringing it up to hook around his hip so he could settle more fully against her. His arousal, already sheathed in the condom he'd retrieved from his wallet, prodded her feminine .opening

Cocking her hips, she opened herself even wider, doing everything she could to ease his entry. He slipped inside, just the tip, but she was already wet and ready for him. She'd been waiting for this moment all her life, and her body was primed and .more than eager for him to finally claim her

A low groan rolled up from his diaphragm as he pressed deeper. Inch by inch, he filled her, stretching her slick inner folds until she .thought she could die from the sheer pleasure of it all

Just when she figured he couldn't go any farther, he pushed forward again. This time, instead of pleasure, a sharp, lightning flash of pain made her stiffen and bite her bottom lip to keep from .crying out

Thankfully, the discomfort passed quickly, and she was once again able to breathe. Above her, Creed held himself perfectly .still, staring down at her. His brows knit in consternation

"Are you all right"

The words were strained, his chest heaving as he struggled to get enough air into his lungs. The muscles in his biceps quivered with the effort to hold his weight off her

She nodded, offering a small smile to let him know she was telling the truth. A beat passed while he considered her answer, then seemed to take her at her word

He returned his mouth to hers, kissing her softly but thoroughly while lower, he began a slow in and out motion that washed away any lingering tenderness. Instead, there was only pleasure

It started as just a trickle, the temporary replacement of something not-so-nice with something not-so-bad. But soon enough the sensation grew, building in ever-increasing waves

She lifted her legs to lock more tightly around his waist, urging him closer. Her hands smoothed up and down his back, the nails alternately digging in and clawing long lines across the sweat-slickened flesh

His own fingers clasped her bottom, kneading and stroking as his thrusts picked up speed. He moved deeper, harder, faster, until she was gasping against his mouth and reaching for...she didn't know what. She only knew she wanted it, needed it, might die without it

Still holding her hip and buttock, Creed's other hand slipped between them and stole into her damp folds, finding the tiny bud of desire hidden within. He rubbed the spot, first lightly, then with more pressure, making her cry out and writhe beneath him

Come with me," he whispered raggedly. The rough line of his cheek abraded hers, his lips mere inches from her ear. "Come".with me now

He pounded into her again, at the same time his fingers worked their magic, sending her off like a rocket. Her mouth opened on a soundless scream, her back arched and her vision went hazy

From somewhere outside her body, she felt him thrust once, twice more and then stiffen above her. Oxygen left his lungs in a loud sigh as he collapsed, his weight pressing her down into the .mattress

She lay there, her legs still wrapped around his waist, her arms still linked about his shoulders and a smile as wide as the Big .Sioux River curving her lips

Making love with Creed Fortune was everything she'd ever imagined and more. It had fulfilled every one of her adolescent fantasies, not to mention more than a few of the hopes and .dreams she'd envisioned since becoming an adult

For the first time, she was glad she hadn't slept with another man, even Brad. She hadn't realized what she was really doing all those years, but she'd inadvertently been saving herself for .Creed, and for that she could never be sorry

She knew better than to think everything would be perfect from this moment on. Creed wasn't going to ask her to marry him in .the next five minutes, or declare his undying love

This was a start, though. They may have put the cart before the horse in their personal relationship by sleeping together before they'd ever even been out on a date, but there was time for all of .that

Time to get to know each other better—really get to know each other. Time to go out, have fun and get the family used to the .idea that they were going to be together

It would come as quite a surprise to the Fortunes, she imagined, including her mother. But they all loved her and Creed, and as long as they were happy, she knew they would offer their support .wholeheartedly. She hoped so, anyway

The important thing was that this was the beginning. The beginning of everything she'd ever wanted, and for the first time, .she realized she could have it

Delight coursed through her veins and her grin widened. It was all she could do to keep from giggling aloud

She couldn't remember ever being so happy. And she would make Creed happy, too, she swore she would

Above her, he shifted slightly, slipping out of her and rolling to his side. Cool air brushed the perspiration dotting her skin, and she immediately missed his weight, his warmth

With a groan, he sat up, rubbed his fingers through his hair, then stood and headed for the adjoining bathroom. She heard the water running for a second, then he was back, in all his naked glory. He stalked across the room, and she took the opportunity to admire him every step of the way

Expecting him to rejoin her, she shimmied toward the head of the bed, rearranging the pillows and crawling under the covers, leaving plenty of room for him to crawl in beside her. They would probably cuddle a bit first, maybe take a nap, then hopefully make love all over again. She couldn't wait

Instead he bypassed the bed altogether, bending to retrieve his jeans from the floor. Without a word he stepped into them, adding his shirt and boots in short order

"Her brows met in a frown. "What are you doing

He didn't bother to meet her gaze as he finished buttoning the pine-green shirt, tucking it into the waistband of his pants

".I'm leaving"

Leaving?" Clutching the sheet to her breasts, she scrambled forward, climbing to her knees. "What do you mean you're leaving? I thought..." She'd thought so many things, but she settled for, "I thought you'd at least stay the night

Why would I stay? Now that I've gotten you out of my system, I can leave you alone. Get on with my life

He finished rolling the sleeves of his shirt to just below the
".elbows, finally glancing in her direction. "Good night, Maya

.Then he turned and walked out of the bedroom

She could hear his footsteps in the hall, pounding down the steps
and through the rest of the house. A second later the front door
.slammed, sending a shiver down her spine

She sat frozen, unable to believe what had just happened. He'd
made love to her, made her believe he cared, that they had a
future together, and then walked out. He'd gotten dressed and
.walked out as if she meant nothing to him

.She felt stunned, her heart squeezing painfully inside her chest

Drawing her knees up, she buried her face in the wrinkled sheet
.and wept

Chase stood on Maya's front porch, leaning against the closed
.door with his eyes tightly closed

He hoped she didn't chase after him. He didn't want to see her
.again, not right now

For one thing, there was nothing left to say. It might have
sounded harsh, but what he'd told her back in her bedroom was
the absolute truth: succumbing to his baser instincts meant he
could move past the almost obsessive longing he'd always felt
.when he was near her

Now that he'd been with her, the mystery was solved. Any
questions he might have been harboring about what she would
look like naked, how her skin would feel beneath his hands and
mouth, what sounds she would make when he was inside her, had
.been answered

For another, he wasn't entirely sure he could look at her right
now and not be sorely tempted to make love to her again. He was

a man, after all, and the last he'd seen Maya, she hadn't been wearing anything more than a thin white sheet, which would be .easy enough to dispense with

Shaking off erotic images that were beginning to reheat his blood, .he pushed away from the door and headed for his car

What the hell had gotten into him, to touch her at all? How could ?he have let things get so out of control

He'd wanted her for a decade, lusted after her in a way no stepbrother had any business lusting. But he'd never, ever intended to act on those desires, and he thought he'd done a .pretty good job of hiding them from Maya and everyone else

Starting the engine, he flipped on the headlights and pulled away from the curb, heading home. He needed a good night's sleep, and maybe a nice, stiff drink to clear his head and make sense of .what he'd done not twenty minutes before

She was off-limits. Forbidden. She always had been. If they'd ever crossed the lines of impropriety, the scandal would have been .huge

He took a hand off the wheel, scrubbing it roughly over his face. Dammit, it would be huge, if anyone ever found out what had .taken place tonight

.Which meant it couldn't happen. No one could find out

He would never intentionally do anything to bring shame or undue attention to his family, so he certainly wasn't going to tell .anyone. And he doubted Maya would, either

.So all he had to do now was keep his hands to himself

Using his pass key, he opened the electronic gate of the underground garage at the Dakota Fortune office building and pulled his dark-blue Mercedes S-class into his personal parking spot near the elevators. His brother Case had a reserved space

right beside his own, but except during business hours, it mostly
.stood empty these days

The same could be said of Case's apartment, across the hall from
Creed's. The top floor of Dakota Fortune had been split into two
separate living areas, which the brothers had occupied after
moving out of the Fortune Estate and taking over as copresidents
.for the family company

Of course, Case was now happily set up in a house just outside
Sioux Falls with his wife, Gina. She'd inherited her childhood
home when her father died, and after living in an apartment in
town for a while, they'd moved onto the larger estate and begun
a few renovations. They were also expecting their first child at the
.end of the year

Creed was happy for them, truly he was, but he had to admit he
missed running into his brother in the hall between their two
front doors. Or only having to cross that small space in order to
.talk to him

His brother's willing ear and sage advice would certainly come in
handy at the moment, though he imagined Case's response to
Creed's dilemma would be much the same as he'd already
.concluded on his own

Stay away from Maya. Chalk up tonight's activities to scratching a
.long-standing itch, then put it behind him and move on

Not a problem. He'd pretty much made that decision even before
.he'd rolled off the bed at Maya's house and made his hasty exit

And a few shots of scotch could only bolster his determination, he
thought, as he let himself into his apartment and headed straight
.for the liquor cabinet

Three

The Fortune Estate was about the last place Maya wanted to be right now. But it was Nash's birthday, and even though he'd insisted he didn't want to celebrate—in fact, that he was in no mood to celebrate while his beloved Patricia's whereabouts were still unknown—the Fortune children had been adamant about getting together

They were keeping the so-called party low-key. No decorations and no guests other than immediate family, just a relaxed cookout and a few understated gifts for the man of the hour

Maya parked along the side of the wide circular drive at the front of the mammoth, gothic-style stone mansion. The trim light gray with wrought iron accents and a black roof. It sat on a hundred and seventy-five acres about twenty miles west of Sioux Falls, just outside the plush suburb of Colonial Pine Hills

The main house consisted of seven bedrooms and nine bathrooms, but there was also a pool, guest house, stable and the cottage where Skylar and her new husband, Zack Manning, were living until their baby was born. After that, they planned to move back to New Zealand, where they would work together on the horse breeding venture they both had dreamed of

The property also boasted a small lake and numerous trails that Maya and the Fortune children had all made great use of when they were younger

Her shoes crunched on crushed stone as she made her way over the drive, beneath the porte cochere and across the wide verandah to the front door, her gift for Nash clutched in her hands. She was wearing a simple yellow sundress and her hair was pulled back in a French braid

If it weren't for Nash, she wouldn't be here at all. Being around the Fortune siblings made her uncomfortable enough under normal circumstances, but it had been only a week since her ill-

fated decision to give herself to Creed, and she had no desire to
.see him again so soon. Or ever, if she could have managed it

But the only thing worse than seeing him again was letting him
think her a coward, and that's exactly what would happen if she
.begged off attending Nash's party

Taking a deep breath, she squeezed the latch on the front door
and let herself into the large marble foyer with its grand, double
.staircase and giant chandelier twinkling overhead

Everything about the Fortune Estate was both comforting and
daunting. She'd grown up in this house, so she felt a certain
connection and warmth, yet she'd also always felt out of place
within the family, and suffered a sense of detachment whenever
she found herself once again inside the vast, artfully decorated
.walls

That was part of the reason she didn't return home very often,
.and hadn't since she'd left for college

.The other part was her deep-seated reluctance to run into Creed

She laughed silently to herself, the mocking sound reverberating
through her brain. How ironic that she'd spent years avoiding the
man as often as she could, only to find herself even more
.desperate to do so now that they'd slept together

The front of the house was empty, but she heard voices coming
from the back and knew everyone was already gathered out on
.the west verandah, overlooking the pool

She moved to the right through the cavernous foyer and west
gallery area to the hallway leading past the dining and gathering
.rooms

Most of the house was decorated in shades of pale gold and deep
red—her mother's choice when she'd redone the interior of the
estate soon after marrying Nash. The kids, including Maya, had of

course been allowed to decorate their own private living quarters
.when they'd gotten old enough

The Fortunes also boasted an impressive collection of modern art and sculpture, some of it lovely, some slightly obscure. For the most part, Nash and Patricia added pieces that caught their fancy, and for no other reason

Above all, the one thing that could be said for the house—which could have easily come across as showy and pretentious—was that regardless of the extravagant decor, it was comfortably livable

The closer she got to the verandah, the louder the voices grew. There was laughter and merriment, but it was more subdued than usual. No matter what they were doing or what the conversation might be, there was no denying that Patricia's absence was foremost on everyone's mind, weighing down their hearts

Maya wished, not for the first time, that there was something she could share, some snippet of information she knew or remembered that would help to find her mother. But no matter how hard she concentrated, nothing came to mind

Standing in the doorway leading outside, she observed the entire Fortune clan in action

Nash and the women of the family were seated at a large round patio table. The two Fortune daughters, Eliza and Skylar, sat closest to their father. Case's wife, Gina, Blake's fiancée, Sasha, and Max's wife, Diana—the two were back in town—made up the rest of the circle, with empty chairs in between for the missing men. They sipped lemonade from tall, hand-painted glasses and munched on potato chips and an assortment of vegetables surrounding a large bowl of dip

A couple of servants bustled around them unobtrusively, topping off drinks, making sure the platters of food never emptied and providing anything else the family might need

Across the verandah, at a shiny silver gas grill the size of a small car, Case, Blake, the Australian cousin, Max, Eliza's husband, Reese, and Skylar's New Zealander husband, Zack, stood together. The men were holding frosted mugs of frothy, imported beer and arguing good-naturedly about how well-done the steaks sizzling on the hot rack should be

And, of course, there was Creed. He stood out from the rest, seeming taller, darker, more handsome. He was also the one manning the grill, holding the others at bay with a long metal spatula that he wielded like a sword before turning to flip the big chunks of browning meat

Maya's stomach tightened at the sight and at the memories that flooded her of their single night together

Creed, she was sure, would be plagued by no such thoughts or memories. He was over her, remember? Now that he'd had her, she was out of his system

That's what he'd said, his parting shot as he'd turned and walked out of her bedroom, out of her house

Too bad he hadn't also walked out of her life. She wouldn't be standing here, struggling for breath and feeling like she might throw up, if he had

She didn't know which was worse—having to attend a Fortune family gathering when she wasn't a part of the family...or having to face Creed so soon after her intimate humiliation at his hands

Without her mother there to make her feel more at ease, she almost wanted to turn around and leave before anyone noticed her, especially Creed. But she knew how much Patricia loved Nash, and that she wouldn't want him to be unhappy. Maya also knew that her mother would want her to do whatever she could to try to ease Nash's burden

That meant attending this party, in spite of her personal reservations

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out onto the verandah with a smile on her face, hoping no one would notice how forced it was

Nash spotted her first and rose from his place at the table to greet her

".Maya, sweetheart! You're here"

He hugged her and kissed her cheek, and at least a portion of her grin turned genuine

Happy birthday," she told him, handing him the beribboned gift, "a gold money clip engraved with his initials

You didn't have to do that," he said, but the corners of his eyes "crinkled with pleasure. He took the present and set it with a pile of other brightly wrapped boxes of varying sizes on a low cedar bench along the outer wall of the house

Come sit down," he invited, taking her hand and leading her "over to the table. The women smiled in greeting, the men waving and calling out from the other side of the verandah

Only one person failed to say hello and looked less than pleased by her arrival. From the corner of her eye, she saw Creed's expression tighten, his hard gaze on her as he lifted the mug of beer to his lips and took a long swallow

He certainly wasn't looking at her like a man who'd recently shared her bed...or wanted to repeat the experience. In fact, she couldn't say he was looking at her any differently than he ever had

The realization shouldn't have wounded her, but it did, sending an arrow straight through her heart

Before she could dwell much longer on his indifference toward her, Gina handed her a glass of lemonade and patted the seat of the chair to her left. The sleeveless denim shirt she wore over white shorts completely hid any signs of her pregnancy. Of course, she was only a few months along, still in the first

trimester, and they had only just recently shared the news with
.the family

Skylar, however, looked ready to pop, even though she still had a couple of months to go before her due date. Once the baby was born and it was safe for them to travel, she and Zach would be going back to New Zealand. They would return to the States to .visit, but that's where they planned to make their home

Maya felt a tiny stab of envy at the picture-perfect lives of the people surrounding her. They were all so happy together, and now positively ecstatic about the impending births of the next .generation of Fortunes

And they deserved it. No doubt about it. But Maya couldn't help the longing and regret that welled up within her when she .compared their level of happiness with her own

She and Nash, it seemed, were the only ones whose lives were in shambles. And at least her stepfather's misery was reasonable and already public, so he didn't have to hide his emotions from everyone. Maya, however, spent the majority of her time pretending to be happier than she was, while inside she felt like .weeping

Sparing a quick glance at Creed, who was busy flipping the steaks again, she decided he didn't belong in the same category as Nash and her. He didn't look miserable in the least, and she was pretty sure he had no interest in settling down anytime soon. Certainly .not with her, at any rate

Sit down and join us," Gina said with an inviting smile. "I'm so "
".glad you could make it

Thank you." Maya took a seat between Nash and Skylar, "
reaching for a chip and holding on to her glass so she would have .something to do with her hands

The guys keep saying the steaks will be done soon," Eliza said, "
her lips twisted wryly. "If you ask me, though, I don't think they

know what they're doing. It's been about two hours now, and this
".rabbit food just isn't cutting it anymore

Eliza rolled her eyes and flicked a hand over the vegetable tray.
"We should have insisted on bringing in caterers or whipping up
something a little more civilized, the way we girls wanted, instead
".of letting the men devise the menu

Oh, let them go," Diana said with a light chuckle. "They're "
enjoying themselves over there, drinking and flexing their
muscles. And we can pay them back later when we start talking
about babies and nurseries and wedding plans." She cast her
gaze around the table at the two expectant mothers and one
.soon-to-be newlywed

Skylar waved a hand to hush the discussion. "Shh, shh, here they
".come

Maya made a point of not looking at Creed as he set a giant
.platter of charred meat on the table

Steaks are done," he announced. "You can stop your whispering "
".and complaining now

We weren't complaining," Eliza responded innocently. "We were "
just saying how nice it is of you to grill these delicious-looking
".steaks for us

Creed shot his sister a pointed look while he took another sip of
".beer. "Uh-huh

I'll get the plates," Sasha announced, jumping up and heading "
.into the house

I'll get the potato salad and mixed fruit," Skylar said, starting to "
.rise

Laying a hand on her arm, Maya signaled for her to stay where
".she was. "You sit. I'll get them

The next few minutes buzzed with chatter and movement as items .were gathered and the table was set

When Maya returned to the verandah with a large bowl of mixed seasonal fruit in her hands, she stopped in her tracks to find that the only chair left vacant after everyone had shifted and reorganized the seating to make room for the men was directly beside Creed. She swallowed hard, wishing she could slip back .into the house and hide

Sitting right beside him, so close that their arms and legs would .likely brush, was more than she could tolerate

.Unfortunately, it didn't look as though she had much choice

Forcing her feet to move, she carried the fruit to the table and set it down before circling around to the one lone empty chair and reluctantly taking a seat. She still refused to look at Creed, to even acknowledge his presence, but her skin hummed at his proximity, the hair on her arms standing at attention as if they'd .been struck with static electricity

He flipped a juicy steak onto her plate, but she ignored him. He passed her the bowl of potato salad and refilled her glass of .lemonade, but she refused to offer him a word of thanks

Under the table, his knee bumped into hers, and she went stiff waiting for the contact to end and her lungs to once again resume .functioning

Did he know he'd touched her? Had he done it on purpose, or was .it simply a result of the cramped situation? She couldn't be sure

The conversation through dinner was upbeat, but with an underlying note of gravity, especially any time Patricia's name happened to come up, causing a veil of sadness to fall over Nash's eyes. Whenever that occurred, they all rushed to change the subject and get Nash's mind off the very real concern of his .missing wife

It surprised Maya to see just how much all of the Fortune children cared for their father. What they were willing to do and how far they were willing to go to put a smile on his face and help keep .him from wallowing in the sorrow of his wife's absence

For so long, she'd thought them cold and aloof, but now she realized she may have been mistaken. Maybe her view of them had been skewed by her own internalized feelings of desolation .and not fitting in

Maybe if she hadn't felt so out of place all her life and had opened up a bit more, let the Fortunes truly become her family, she would .have seen their warmth and compassion sooner

She found herself swamped with guilt for that, for not being more open-minded in the past. But she was also glad she was finally beginning to see another side to the people she'd lived with for half her life. It was comforting, lifting her spirits at least for a .moment

She only wished she could identify and alter her feelings for Creed as easily as her feelings for the rest of the Fortunes seemed to be changing. But where he was concerned, her insides .were knotted with disillusionment and uncertainty

He'd come over to her house and made love to her, taken her virginity and then walked out like it meant nothing. She hadn't seen or heard from him since, and now that they were forced to be near each other, he hadn't made a single gesture or remark .that even acknowledged what they'd shared

While her body flushed with heat every time he glanced in her direction or got too close, he was treating her no differently than .ever before. Like a sister, not a lover

She swallowed hard, the last bite of birthday cake she'd just .eaten sitting like a lead weight at the bottom of her stomach

She'd gone from thinking all of her dreams concerning Creed were finally coming true, to having them dashed just as quickly. It was .enough to make her want to give up on men altogether

Glancing surreptitiously at her watch, she decided she'd been at the party long enough that she could make her excuses and slip .away

The meal dishes had already been cleared, Nash had opened his gifts, and everyone had enjoyed at least one slice of cake. And as much fun as she'd had, as glad as she'd been that she could be there for Nash, she didn't know how much longer she could be .near Creed without either screaming or bursting into tears

Using the excuse that she had lessons to correct for school the next day, she quietly made her way around the verandah to say good-night. They all hugged her and kissed her cheek, some asking if she was sure she couldn't stay longer, others inviting .her to their respective homes anytime she had a mind to visit

Maya was touched, and found herself promising she would, even though she had no idea when she would find the time to drive to Deadwood, which was more than three hundred and fifty miles .away, let alone fly all the way to Australia

The only person she didn't bother saying goodbye to was Creed. Although she hadn't done it on purpose, she was able to leave the verandah and head back through the house to her car before he returned from a trip to the kitchen to refill the ice chest with .sodas and beer

.That one thing, at least, had fallen in her favor

Creed caught sight of Maya's retreating form the minute he set foot back out on the verandah with an armful of assorted cans and bottles. It was just like her to sneak away, slink off quietly .the same as she had so many times when she was a kid

He paused for a second until she'd disappeared from view, then strode to the open cooler a few feet away. Dropping the drinks into the pool of melting ice, he slammed the lid closed and turned .on his heel

His brother Case stood nearby, watching his actions with a raised .eyebrow

Be right back," he said without further explanation, stalking " .across the verandah and into the house after Maya

He caught up with her as she was getting into her car. The driver's-side window was down, a soft breeze ruffling the wisps of dark hair that had come loose from her braid to fall around her .cheeks and temples

".Maya, wait up"

For a minute he thought she was going to ignore him and drive away, even though he was sure she'd heard him. Then her shoulders seemed to slump and her hand fell from where it had .been ready to turn the key in the ignition

Slowly she lifted her head to meet his gaze. Her brown eyes, usually so soft, were cold. She didn't say anything, simply stared .at him and waited for him to speak

He wondered if she realized what a beautiful woman she was, then could have kicked himself for letting the thought slide through his mind. She was off-limits, that's all there was to it, and he had no intention of lowering his defenses enough for a repeat .of the mistake he'd made last week

It was true, though. The half-Sioux blood running through her veins made her features striking. High cheekbones, brown eyes and dark, sultry skin all came together to create a stunningly .sensual package

If she stopped wearing the shapeless dresses and oversize tops and slacks she was so fond of, she'd be a real knockout. Of

course, then she would have even more men sniffing around her .skirts than she already did

A flash of anger poured through him and his jaw clenched. Whatever he'd planned to say when he'd first followed her out here was suddenly replaced by the image of her with other men, .including that Brad McKenzie she'd been seeing for the past year

His teeth ground together even harder. Creed was the first man she'd been with; he knew that because he'd been the one to take .her virginity. And up to now, he'd felt a little guilty about that

But if her first time hadn't been with him, it probably would have been with McKenzie, and that was somehow an even more bitter .pill to swallow

Where are you going?" he asked, his voice sharp, with an " .accusing edge he hadn't intended when he'd approached her

She bristled visibly, her knuckles going white where she gripped the steering wheel. "Not that it's any of your business, but I have ".papers to grade before school tomorrow

At her response, the tension in his muscles began to ease. He didn't know what he'd expected her to say, but he was unaccountably relieved the answer didn't have anything to do .with another man. Especially McKenzie

He leaned down, resting an arm on the roof of the car while his other hand rested on the open window frame of the driver's-side .door

In a tone more relaxed than before, he said, "Just so you know, I hired a couple of extra private detectives to look into your mother's disappearance. Some guys I've worked with on and off over the years. They're good, so hopefully we'll have some ".information soon

Seconds ticked by in silence with her gaze locked on his. Her tongue darted out to lick her dry lips and she nodded. "Thank
".you

Pushing away from the car, he straightened and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "I did it as much for Dad as for you. The P.I.s he hired don't seem to be making much progress,
".and I figured a few more men on the job couldn't hurt

He took a step back and then another, the soles of his boots crunching on the stone drive as he put a safe distance between them. If he didn't, he was afraid he'd be tempted to do something
.stupid

.Like kiss her again

And that was a definite no-no, so the sooner he went back inside
.and let her be on her way, the better

Thanks for coming. It meant a lot to Dad. Drive carefully," he " added, then spun on his heel and put her promptly out of his
.mind

Four

Maya was in the middle of a math lesson when the office buzzed that she had a phone call. Butterflies fluttered wildly in her stomach while she went next door to ask Mrs. Kurschbaum to watch her class for a few minutes. Then she walked down the hall
.to the teachers' lounge where she could use the phone

She hoped it wasn't Brad again. He didn't make a habit of calling her at work unless it was important, but lately he'd been more
.dogged than usual in his attempts to get ahold of her

Not that she could blame him, since she'd been avoiding him as assiduously as he'd been trying to get in touch with her. She'd

spoken to him a few times, but so far managed to circumvent
.seeing him in person

She knew he was getting suspicious, that he knew something was
wrong or going on behind his back. And he was right, because she
.simply didn't know how to face him after sleeping with Creed

She'd been dating Brad for nearly a year, growing closer by the
week. She even thought they might have eventually ended up
walking down the aisle. Even so, when it came to moving past
.first or second base, she'd kept him at arm's length

But the minute Creed looked at her with so much as a hint of
passion in his shadowy blue eyes, she'd fallen into bed with him
".faster than he could say "pretty please

A rush of shame washed over her at the memory. She'd thought
that night was the beginning of happily-ever-after for her, but
Creed's behavior immediately after they'd made love had
.disabused her of that notion quickly enough

Now she almost felt like an adulteress, as though she'd cheated
.on Brad with a much less desirable man

.Well, not less desirable. Creed could never be described as that

Oh, no, he was still infinitely desirable. No matter how hard she
tried to deny it or to block him from her heart and mind, she
.couldn't seem to stop being attracted to him

She wished to heaven she could. It would make her life so much
.easier

Finally reaching the teachers' lounge and phone, she lifted the
.handset and punched the blinking button for line three

"?Hello"

"?Maya"

It wasn't Brad, and the butterflies in her stomach didn't know whether to settle down or speed up. She swallowed hard and lowered herself into a nearby chair

"I'm in the middle of a class, Creed. What do you want"

Was there nowhere she could be safe from of this man? Bad enough she ran into him at the Fortune Estate every time she went to visit. Even those times she did her best to avoid being there when she thought he might be around. But now he was showing up at her house and calling her at work

She wished she knew where her mother was. Wished Patricia had said something before she'd disappeared, and that Maya might have had the chance to go with her. Anything to gain a little peace from Creed Fortune's overwhelming, overbearing and increasingly painful presence

"We need to talk," he said without apology for making her "abandon her students in the middle of a lesson. "When school lets out, don't leave. I'm going to pick you up

Her brow creased. "Why?" And then her heart skipped a beat.

"—"Has something happened? Is it my mother? Did you find

"I have some information, but we can't discuss it now. I'll pick you" up in a couple hours

Before she could protest or demand he tell her what was going on, the line went dead. She sat in stunned silence for another minute the dial tone ringing in her ears as loudly as Creed's words

When she thought she could function without feeling as if she'd just run face-first into a lamppost, she returned the phone to its cradle and walked slowly to her classroom. She thanked Mrs. Kurschbaum for watching her students and somehow managed to stumble her way through the rest of the day

Her mind raced the entire time, her pulse not far behind. She wondered what Creed had found out. Did he know where her mother was? Was she all right

The end of the day couldn't come quickly enough, and as soon as the kids had gathered their things and raced out of the building, Maya grabbed her purse and followed. Normally she would have stuck around for a while, straightening the room, dealing with paperwork, even gathering a few things to take home with her. Today, though, she left everything behind in her mad dash for the parking lot

Buses loaded with rambunctious children were pulling away from the curb. She smiled and waved several times as students who weren't used to seeing her again before they went home called her name, but her eyes were scanning the area for Creed's car

As the last bus lumbered off, she spotted his midnight-blue Mercedes-Benz turning into the school's main drive. He coasted to a stop directly in front of her, the tinted windows hiding everything inside the vehicle from view

Reaching for the latch, she yanked the door open and jumped inside. She twisted in her seat to face him, slightly out of breath, not from exertion but anxiety

"All right, what's going on? Did you find Mom"

He shook his head, keeping his gaze trained straight ahead as the car rolled forward. "Not yet. Let me get you home first

Home? Why call me in the middle of the day and pick me up at all when you could have just waited until I got home and met me there? Tell me what's going on, Creed

He slowed to check traffic, then pulled away from the school and onto the main road

Soon. Now buckle up.” Reaching across her, he grabbed the seat“ belt and stretched it toward him, fumbling blindly for the snap .while he kept his eyes on the road

With a frustrated sigh, she took the buckle out of his hand and clicked it into place herself. Although she wanted to argue, she knew better than to think she could get him to say anything .before he was darn good and ready

Thankfully, her town house wasn’t far from the school, so it wouldn’t take them long to get there. Still, she spent the ten-minute drive tapping her foot, fisting and unfisting her fingers, .drumming her nails on the armrest

She was surprised Creed didn’t tell her to cut it out. But then, he seemed preoccupied himself, his jaw set in a tight line, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, more intent on his driving .than usual

When they reached her house, he found a place to park and cut the engine. Throwing open his door, he came around to hers, but .she was already out, digging in her purse for her keys

She unlocked the front door and let them both in, then tossed her .purse aside and turned on him

Okay,” she said, her arms folded beneath her breasts. “We’re “ ”.home. Now tell me what’s going on

He nodded, shrugging out of his jacket and loosening the tie knotted around his neck. He tossed both over the back of a .kitchen chair, then headed for the living room

Rolling her eyes, she clamped down on the urge to scream and followed him. She found him taking a seat on her sofa, his fingers undoing the buttons at his collar and wrists, rolling the stark .white material of the dress shirt to his elbows

.Have a seat,” he told her, patting the cushion on his right“

**If I do, I want you to tell me what you found out,” she demanded. “
”.“No more stalling**

**Meeting her gaze for the first time since he’d picked her up at
”.school, his mouth lifted in a half-hearted grin. “Sit down, Maya**

**As much as she didn’t want to, she stepped forward and lowered
herself onto the sofa beside him. She jerked slightly when he laid
.one of his large hands over hers where it rested on her knee**

**One of the private investigators I hired contacted me this “
morning with some information about your mother. And I want
you to know that I haven’t said anything to anyone else yet. Not
even Dad. I wanted to talk to you first and thought you should be
”.the first to know**

**She frowned, her concern growing by leaps and bounds at his soft
tone and kind attitude toward her. He wasn’t usually this nice,
.which meant something terrible must be going on**

**Just tell me,” she forced herself to say past a throat growing “
.tight with dread**

**Lifting her hand from her knee, he turned it over and linked his
fingers with hers. At another time the action would have warmed
her, made her think that maybe he had feelings for her after all.
Now it only made her realize how ominous the news he had to
.share must be**

**It turns out Patricia isn’t actually a widow, as she’s always “
claimed. Her first husband—your father—Wilton Blackstone, is
alive. The investigators tracked him down and had a little talk
with him. Leaned on him a bit,” he said, the slight lift of one dark
”.brow telling her exactly what he meant by “leaned on**

**It turns out he’s been blackmailing Patricia for months, “
threatening to tell Dad that their marriage isn’t valid because
she’s still legally married to him. We think that’s why she
disappeared, that she ran off to get away from your father—and
”.to keep mine from finding out the truth**

Maya sat in stunned silence, her mind trying desperately to make sense of everything Creed had just told her

Her father was still alive? Her mother had been lying to her all these years? Lying to Nash and the entire Fortune family

Tears prickled behind her eyes, and her heart felt as though it would pound out of her chest

I don't understand," she said in a watery voice. "How can that be? If my father is still alive, where has he been all these years? Why didn't Mom tell me? And why didn't any of Nash's private investigators discover this earlier

I don't know why Dad's guys didn't find out about this," he answered softly, "but my guys are good. That's why I hired them. I only wish I'd done it sooner. And I don't know why your mother didn't tell you any of this, but according to my sources, for the past almost twenty years, Wilton Blackstone has been living in Texas. I have to tell you, too, that from the sound of it, he's not a nice man, Maya

His free hand moved to her back to rub reassuringly up and down her spine. "What, if anything, did your mother tell you about your father

She shook her head, as much to dispel the confusing thoughts and memories swimming around in her brain as to answer his question

She told me he was dead, the same as she told everyone else. I was only five years old when...well, when Mom told me he'd died, so I don't remember much about him. And what I do remember isn't good. He was very violent and abusive. Like you said, not a nice man

".I'm sorry"

Overwhelming emotion threatened again, and she sniffed to hold back tears. "It doesn't matter. I don't even know him, and he

obviously never cared much about finding or getting to know me if he's been alive all these years. I'm worried about my mother. Where could she be if she's hiding from him? She must be so ".frightened, and she's all alone

Creed leaned in and pressed a kiss to her temple. His lips were warm, even through her hair, and she felt an unreasonable degree of comfort despite the common sense telling her it was .merely a brotherly gesture and meant nothing otherwise

.Do you have any idea where she might have gone?" he asked"

Pulling back, she glared at him through narrowed, damp eyes. "If I did, don't you think I would have said something by now? I'm just as worried about her as everyone else and want to find her ".just as much. Maybe more

I know." His fingers trailed up the line of her back and beneath " the fall of her hair. Reaching her neck, he began to gently knead her nape. "But now that you understand why she disappeared, I thought something might come to mind, something you wouldn't have thought to consider before. Did your mother ever talk about Wilton, about her habits or behavior when she was with him?

"?What she did when he—" he cringed "—beat her

She considered for a moment, but couldn't recall anything that ".might be helpful. "No, I'm sorry

He tugged her close, his arm wrapping around her waist and holding her tight against his side. "It's all right. We're going to find her. The investigators are still on the job, and after turning ".up this information, I'm sure they'll be able to track her down

I'm so worried about her," Maya said in a small voice, leaning " .into him and letting his soothing disposition seep into her bones

".So am I. But everything's going to be okay. I promise"

Raising her head, she offered him a tremulous smile. He couldn't promise any such thing, and they both knew it, but the words .brought a modicum of solace all the same

Thank you, Creed. Thank you for being here and for doing so “
”.much to try to find my Mom

His mouth curved slightly, his hands cupping her face as he wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. “We're all concerned
”.about Patricia. Besides, you're family

When she met his gaze, she noticed his smile slipping at the .edges, and the look in his eyes was anything but familiar

A spark of awareness flared low in her belly, spreading quickly outward, even as her mind warned her not to be drawn in by his kind words or the heat in his eyes. She'd wandered down that path once before and gotten nothing but heartache for her .troubles

But the heat of his palms caressed her skin, and his blue eyes were as deep and fathomless as the ocean during a storm. Pulling .her in, making her feel safe

For months now, she'd felt so isolated and alone. Even with all of the Fortunes rallying around Nash—and thereby remaining in close proximity to her—she'd still felt as though she was all by herself in this situation. No one could truly understand what she .was going through

Nash loved Patricia. She knew that. And in their own way, the .Fortune children did, too

But Patricia was her mother, giving them a bond unlike any other. Nobody knew what they'd been through together or what Maya had been going through since her mother had gone missing. The fear, the uncertainty, the insecurity of belonging nowhere and with no one, since Patricia was her only real link to the Fortunes, .her so-called family

She knew it was crazy, foolish and possibly even sheer desperation on her part, but Creed made her feel less alone, more like she belonged, and more as though everything really would .work out in the end

His fingers slid through her hair to cup the back of her skull and tilt her face up to his. She closed her eyes and surrendered to .what she was beginning to consider the inevitable

He was her Achilles' heel, her weakness. When he was around, .her insides turned to mush and her brain ceased to function

.They'd done this before. She'd capitulated before

Capitulated? More like thrown herself into his arms wholeheartedly and had practically been planning the wedding .before the sheets were cold

And immediately afterward, he'd gotten dressed and walked .away

That's why she was crazy to be letting this happen again. She .knew better. She knew he would only hurt her—again

The minute his mouth touched hers, the insanity seemed more than worth the price of admission. His lips were warm and firm, tasting of coffee and something else she couldn't quite identify. Maybe it was simply Creed, his unique essence invading her every .pore

His arms snaked around her back, holding her, cradling her against his hard chest. Her own arms felt leaden as she lifted them to his shoulders and neck, moaning as he deepened the .kiss

He'd said she was out of his system, that once he'd had her, he could move on. But this was far from moving on. He was just as involved in the kiss as she was, just as eager for more, and that .gave her a sense of power she'd never experienced before

Despite his claims to the contrary, he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Maybe not forever, or for more than this very .moment, but it was enough

She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him closer and urging him on. His own hands began to tug at the tail of her shirt, .tucked into the waistband of charcoal-gray slacks

When he had the material free, he spanned her bare waist with his warm, broad hands. His fingertips were like conductors, .sending tiny shockwaves through her, everywhere they touched

Her limbs felt heavy, almost immovable. Heat pooled low in her belly, making her squirm with wanting, with need, with eagerness. The emotions rolled up her throat and came out her mouth, where it was still clamped tight to his. He groaned back .and delved even more deeply with his tongue

His hands beneath her blouse slid higher, skimming the edges of her modest white bra, then the undersides of her breasts and her quickly beading nipples within the cotton and lace. At the clear signs of her physical response to his caresses, he grew bolder, .reaching around to release the hooks at the center of her back

With the garment hanging loose around her, he was able to slide his hands up and under. He cupped her firmly in both palms, his thumbs alternately flicking and then drawing circles around the .puckered centers

She was writhing now, desperate for everything he could give her. One of her pumps slipped off her foot and fell to the floor with a clunk as she tried to crawl farther onto his lap. He grabbed her thigh and pulled her closer, brushing stray wisps of hair away from her neck so he could brush his lips over the rapidly beating .pulse point

Her fingers fumbled between them, working to release the row of buttons at the front of his dress shirt. With her head tipped back and her eyes closed in ecstasy, it was a simple task turned almost .impossible

**But Creed took mercy on her, undoing the even smaller buttons
.on her blouse before finishing his own**

**As soon as the two sides of the soft cotton separated, she drove
her fingers under the collar and into the arm holes, pushing it
down his strong, well-muscled arms. The cuffs caught at his wrists
.and she gave a small cry of frustration**

**He chuckled and yanked back while she still held the edges of
material in her clenched hands. Fabric tore and she heard buttons
.ping across the room**

**His broad chest was gloriously bare as he sat back, studying her
.through heavy-lidded, desire-darkened eyes**

.Your turn," he whispered"

**Not waiting for her to protest or comply, he reached out to strip
.both blouse and bra from her upper body**

**The cool air of the room washed over her heated skin, making her
.shiver, and she suddenly felt self-conscious of her nudity**

**They'd done this once before. She'd already been naked in front
of him, but she wasn't quite ready to sit on her couch, in broad
.daylight, with her breasts hanging out**

**She lifted her arms to cover herself, but Creed stopped her,
.wrapping his fingers around her wrists and holding them away**

**Don't," he warned in a low voice. "You're beautiful. You should "
be proud of your body instead of hiding inside those oversize
".dresses and loose pantsuits you like so much**

**His hands slid from her wrists to her elbows, then back, making
the little hairs on her arms stand on end. She shivered again,
.even though she was far from cold this time**

**And she squirmed, because his words made her uncomfortable.
She wasn't beautiful; she knew that. She was plain and rather
.average looking**

But for this one moment in time, he made her feel beautiful. Sexy and sensual, even. His gaze, glittering with barely restrained passion, skimmed over her, singeing her from head to toe as .thoroughly as an open flame

He brought her hands to his mouth, one after the other. Pressed his lips to each of her knuckles in turn, then the center of her .palms and the tiny, bluish veins on the insides of her wrists

Any vestiges of shyness disappeared beneath his tender assault and reignited her yearning a thousand percent. Physiologically impossible or not, she felt ready to melt like an ice cube left too .long in the sun

He placed her hands, with their now-tingling digits, on his bare shoulders before leaning in to press a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. He followed that up with a kiss to the other corner, .then her cheeks, temples, eyelids

While his lips drifted softly over her face, his hands toyed briefly at her breasts on their way to her waist, where he made quick work of loosening her slacks and pushing them down her hips. She moved in whatever ways he needed to get the pants, .pantyhose and her underwear all the way off

As soon as that was done, he shed his own shoes and expensively tailored dress pants, leaving everything in a wrinkled pile on the living room floor. All she could do while this was going on was knead his shoulders and squirm with the longing pumping .through her veins

Reality prodded the outer edges of her mind, threatening to ruin the cloud of euphoria that had formed around them, but she wouldn't let it. Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with the fact that this wasn't real and wouldn't last. Soon enough to go back to the near-hostile stepsibling relationship that kept them .walking on eggshells around each other

Today, this very moment, she had a second chance at living out a lifelong fantasy, and she had every intention of taking full advantage of the opportunity

Five

G rasping Maya under the arms, Creed scooped her up and redeposited her on the couch. He wanted her under him, open to him and arranged in such a way that he didn't have to worry about dropping her or bouncing her off the sofa at some highly inopportune moment

Reaching blindly toward the floor, he groped for his pants and fumbled around until he found a condom tucked safely in the folds of his wallet. He kept one there at all times, just in case, and thanked God he'd remembered to add another packet after the first night he'd spent with Maya

Keeping his gaze locked on her—her flushed face, the rapid rise and fall of her bare, lovely breasts—he tore open the plastic square and safely covered himself

Then, with her back against the arm at one end of the sofa and the soft, wide cushions supporting her lithe, blessedly naked form, he spread her legs and settled himself firmly between them. If he had a choice, he would keep her like this forever and never move out of the cradle of her smooth, welcoming thighs

He should have left twenty minutes ago. Should have called her at school, or even waited until she'd gotten home, to tell her what the private investigator had found out about her mother and not-dead-after-all father. It would have been the safer route to take

But he hadn't been able to bring himself to break news like that over the phone. And the twenty-minutes ago ship had clearly

sailed. Hell, the vessel was halfway around the world by now. He
.couldn't leave her now if someone held a gun to his head

Lapse in judgment or not, he'd started this and he was damn well
.going to finish it

Not that making love to her again was going to be any great trial.
.He was already so hard for her, he was ready to burst

Their bodies melded together from chest to pelvis, his erection
straining toward her warm, damp center. But he wasn't ready to
end this encounter quite so quickly. He wanted to make it last,
wanted the swirling, ragged sensations building inside them both
.to linger a while longer

He kissed her, brushing her lips and teasing her tongue with only
a fraction of the passion burning in his gut. His fingers sifted
through her long, silky hair, spreading it out around her head, like
.a dark cloud in a thunder-riddled sky

Abandoning her mouth, he trailed a line of nips and licks down her
throat to her breasts. She was clawing at his shoulders, upper
arms, and whatever part of his back she could reach. Driving him
.crazy and straining his already tenuous control

He thought about grabbing her wrists again to keep her from
sending him straight over the edge, but what she was doing felt
too damn good. So he started counting from one to ten and back
again—slowly, in three languages. Mentally reciting a few
statistics for local sporting teams that came readily to mind. Re-
hashing the details of a recent business deal he and Case had
made for Dakota Fortune. Anything to keep the top of his head
from shooting off before he'd even gotten to the best part of
.being naked with Maya Blackstone

And if she was going to take him to the brink, almost without
.trying, then he fully intended to do the same to her

He began to feast at her breasts as he'd always dreamed, taking
his time and being thorough. He circled one of the swollen peaks

with the tip of his tongue, then scraped the rough surface across the pointed nipple. At the same time, he teased the other breast, squeezing, rubbing, tweaking with thumb and index finger. She squirmed beneath him, arching her back and offering herself to him more fully

”Creed, please“

Her voice was a whimper, and a streak of power rushed through him. She was his for the taking. At his mercy. He could do just about anything to her and she wouldn't try to stop him

But he didn't want to do anything to her, he wanted to do it with her. Now

Without abandoning her breasts completely, he slid a palm down the plane of her stomach, into the triangle of springy curls between her legs to test her readiness. She was hot and wet against his fingers, and he groaned, clamping his jaw to keep even more desperate, pathetic sounds from working their way up his throat

”I'm going to take you now,” he all but growled“

A warning or a promise, he wasn't sure. He worked two fingers gently into her channel and was rewarded by the jerk of her hips and a high mewling rolling past her lips

Yes, please,” she panted when she was capable of speech. “
”.”You're taking too long as it is

He started to chuckle but ended with a low moan as she brought her legs around his waist and locked them at the ankles

Hey,” he grated, surprised his brain was still functioning well “
enough to send sensible signals to his vocal chords. “Who's the more experienced person here? How would you know I'm taking
”?too long

”I just do. Now get to it already,” she demanded“

To emphasize her point, she moved a hand from his bicep to the narrow space between their sweat-slick bodies and wrapped her slim fingers around his burgeoning length

The action was so shocking, and so pleasurable, he nearly came

His muscles tensed, his entire frame going rigid as he fought to pull himself back from the point of no return. Inhaling and exhaling carefully, breathing through his nose as though he'd just run a thousand-yard dash, he covered her hand and pried open her surprisingly strong grip

Don't do that," he said, moving her hand a safe distance from "what he now considered the danger zone

At his firm reprimand, her chocolate-brown eyes turned cloudy and she seemed to pull back. Not physically, but emotionally. At her side, her fingers curled into a loose fist

Dammit. Creed cursed himself and then Maya's innocence. She was too inexperienced to know just how close he was to losing it. To not only embarrassing himself, but robbing them both of the ultimate pleasure their joining could bring

He wasn't used to dealing with virgins. Even if Maya was no longer a technical virgin, she had been only a week ago—before he'd taken her the first time. For all the more she knew about men and sex, she might as well still be one

Not because I don't like it," he told her, quickly trying to repair "any damage he might have caused. "Believe me, I do. Too much. But if you keep touching me that way, I won't last long enough to get inside you. And I very much want to be inside you

He watched the tendons of her throat tighten and release as she swallowed

So...I can touch you later?" she asked, her tone tentative"

He gritted his teeth even harder to stifle a groan, his fingers flexing on her hips. "Yes, you can touch me later. Touch me, kiss

me, do whatever you like to me.” He shuddered as his mind filled
”.with visions of her taking him into her mouth. “Later

”.She nodded, her expression solemn. “All right

A second later she wiggled beneath him, her legs squeezing
around his waist, her hands curling over his shoulders and
.drawing him closer

Hurry up and come inside me, then, so I can hurry up and touch “
you however I want.” She smiled wickedly, her tongue darting out
to lick her lips like a practiced courtesan. “I have ideas, and
”.things I’ve been fantasizing about for years

His body bucked at her blatant carnal promise, and he marveled
.that he hadn’t burst into flames already

Heaven help me,” he muttered raggedly. “You’ll be the death of “
”.me. I won’t make it through the hour

She canted her hips, bringing her feminine center flush with his
”.throbbing groin. “You never know unless you try

His breath hissed out in a gust. “Devil woman.” And then he took
her mouth in a passionate kiss, guiding himself into her warm
.sheath

.Maya gasped as he entered her completely, filling her to the hilt

She might not be as experienced as Creed, but a girl could
definitely get used to this sort of thing: being in the arms of the
man she’d had a crush on the majority of her life; having him
touch her, kiss her, work her into a frenzy of lust so strong she
.wanted to weep

He pounded against her, being less than gentle, but she didn’t
care. She raised her legs even higher around his waist, allowing
him to enter her just a fraction more, until she swore he touched
.her womb

Her arms clutched his back, her belly quivering with every stroke of his velvet hardness inside her. She panted for more and .whispered in his ear for him to go deeper, faster

He complied, a muscle in his jaw ticking rhythmically as he gripped her thighs, held her in place, brought her roughly into .contact with him on each downward slide

”.Yes.” Her lungs burned as she struggled for air. “Please, yes“

.Yes,” he agreed, the word slipping from between clenched teeth“

A second later she was flying. Creed’s hands and mouth and body worked as a single unit to drive her over the edge, gasping as .wave after wave of orgasm shook her to her core

Following her into the abyss, he ground against her one last time before shouting his release. He sank down on top of her, his heavy weight pinning her in place as their chests rose and fell in a .synchronized bid for oxygen

By the time either of them had the strength to move, the sky outside the town house windows was starting to grow dim with the first pale streaks of dusk. Creed rolled to his side, still holding her as best he could on the narrow sofa. The side of one thumb drew nonsensical designs on her upper arm while the fingers of .his other hand drifted through the ends of her hair

Her eyes were growing heavy, and she thought that if she let them close, she could probably sleep for a week. But he’d promised her something, and she didn’t intend to drift off until .she was sure he would follow through on their agreement

She turned slightly, snuggling closer, rubbing her cheek against .the smooth skin at the hollow of his shoulder

Now that that’s done,” she said, struggling to keep her tone “”?level and detached, “it’s my turn, right

Her fingers wandered over his left pectoral, lightly covered with a dusting of dark hair, then lower, down the center of his flat

stomach. She felt his abdominal muscles tense as he sucked in his
.breath

.Your turn for what?" he asked"

With her head tipped away from him, he couldn't see her smile.
He wasn't fooling her, though. Regardless of his words, his body
.knew exactly what she was talking about

She lifted her face to his, leaning in to catch his bottom lip gently
between her teeth and give it a little tug. "To touch you.
"?Anywhere I like. Any way I like. Remember

He opened his mouth to deny it, even started to shake his head.
But when she took hold of his reviving member and gave it a little
.squeeze, he could only groan in surrender

"?...All right, all right. Yes, I remember. But are you sure"

She pumped him again, just once, but with enough pressure to let
him know she meant business. He moaned again, a low, ragged
sound, and closed his eyes as his head fell back against the arm
.of the couch

Grinning at his acquiescence and the sudden rush of power
bubbling through her bloodstream, she shifted around to straddle
.his legs and hover above him

It was going to be a long night, and she intended to enjoy every
.minute of it to the absolute fullest

.And if she had her way, she would make sure Creed did, too

Creed lay in the dark of Maya's quiet bedroom, wide awake and
kicking himself for what he'd done. He'd let down his guard and
touched her a second time when he never should have touched
.her the first time

Second time, hell. Try third, fourth and maybe fifth times; he'd
.lost count somewhere around midnight

For only recently losing her virginity, she'd been insatiable. Not that he'd tried very hard to put her off or keep himself from turning to her over and over again

He never should have touched her to begin with. He knew that. But now that he had, he couldn't seem to stop. She was a fire in his blood, and he seemed powerless to stay away from her

He sighed, then went rigid when she burrowed closer to his side. They'd already made love multiple times. So often and with such enthusiasm that Maya had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep

But try telling that to his libido. The feel of her soft curves nestled against him like a second skin brought his arousal flaring back to life

Her head on his shoulder...her silky hair falling across his arm... her dainty hand curled on his chest...one leg drawn up and twined with his own. How could any man resist such an enticing temptation, regardless of the risks involved

It didn't sit well with Creed to concede that he was as weak as any other male of his species when it came to Maya Blackstone. But part of that weakness, he admitted, stemmed from the fact that she needed him right now

She had been stunned by the news that her biological father was still alive, and terrified for her mother's safety, especially being aware that Wilton Blackstone was likely the reason for Patricia's disappearance. He'd seen the shock and despair etched clearly on her face as he'd broken the news

That's why she'd turned to him, and why he'd allowed himself to move past the invisible barriers he'd erected to keep her at arm's length

She'd needed him. Needed comfort and human contact, the distraction of physical intimacy to get her mind off the situation with her mother. And, God help him, he hadn't been able to walk away from her, even if he'd wanted to

He tipped his head to stare down at her, doing his best not to notice the generous swell of her breasts or the way they spilled so attractively across his chest

She still needed him, and would until her mother was found and brought home where she belonged. As soon as that happened, all of their lives would go back to normal and he would be able to leave her alone, focus his mind—and hormones—on other things

Stress and uncertainty, that's all this was. They were both acting completely out of character, and he felt the tightness in his lungs and diaphragm ease at that crystal-clear realization

As long as what was going on between them at the moment remained private, and no one—especially the media—found out, they would be okay

He swallowed, relaxing more fully into the pillows at his back. Beside him, Maya stirred. Her soft brown eyes blinked open and she stretched like a contented cat, her rosy, well-kissed lips curving in a smile when she found him awake and watching her. "Hi," she said, her voice a sensual purr

"Hi," he returned with a suggestive grin of his own, welcoming the hot, heavy flush of arousal beginning to pump once again through every cell of his being

"What time is it"

He cast his gaze over her shoulder, in the direction of the digital clock on the bedside table. "About 4:00a.m

She groaned, closing her eyes and burying her face in his chest. But just as quickly, she came back up, shaking her hair out of the way and starting to press light kisses along the line of his jaw, which he was sure needed a shave by now

"I have to start getting ready for work in a couple hours," she told him

**Me, too,” he said, bringing his hands up to skim her waist and “
.the small of her back**

”.I’ll be so tired tomorrow I’ll probably fall asleep at my desk“

**He gave a rueful chuckle, picturing that very situation and how
much ribbing he would get from everyone in the Dakota Fortune
”.offices if they found out about it. “Me, too**

”.But that gives us two hours to enjoy ourselves again“

**He glanced at the clock, did the math, weighed the pros and cons
of missing out on a full night of sleep. There was no contest—
.making love to Maya would win every time**

**Capturing her mouth, he kissed her breathless, then rolled until
he loomed over her, and made sure neither of them got a wink of
.sleep before the sun broke over the horizon**

**Maya had expected to be exhausted all day, but instead she was
brimming with energy and couldn’t seem to wipe the smile from
her face. Not even when Mikey Roth put gum in Sally Mattea’s
hair, and the little girl screamed bloody murder for almost an
.hour**

**She’d punished Mikey by putting him on animal-clean-up duty for
the rest of the week, which basically meant he would be helping
her care for the guinea pig and small aquarium of fish she kept as
unofficial classroom mascots. Then she’d sent to the cafeteria for
some butter and ice cubes, and spent all of recess sitting cross-
legged at the edge of the playground, working a giant hunk of
watermelon-flavored bubblegum out of Sally’s blond, baby-fine
.hair**

**There was no doubt what had put her in such a good mood—a
night of mind-blowing sex with the man she’d dreamed of as Mr.
.Right for half her life**

She knew it was dangerous to let herself get too swept away by what was happening between them. There was no way it would .last. No happily-ever-after for her where Creed was concerned

Frankly, she was surprised he'd stayed with her all night instead of running for the door as soon as they'd finished their impromptu .lovemaking session on the living room sofa

But he hadn't. He'd stuck around until morning, and they'd .definitely made good use of the time

She couldn't let it go to her head, though. She had to keep her .feet firmly on the ground and her heart deeply rooted in reality

Whatever was going on between the two of them right now was only temporary. Explosive, earth-shattering, beyond her wildest .fantasies...but temporary

Still, they weren't hurting anyone. As long as she kept her wits about her and didn't start imagining that things could develop .into more than was possible, she would be all right

She'd spent the morning carefully considering every angle of the situation, playing out every probable scenario. The result was that she'd decided to move cautiously forward with...whatever .this was

Before Creed had dropped her off at school on his own way back home and to work—because her car was still in the school parking lot from when he'd picked her up the afternoon before—he'd run a hand through her loose hair and leaned across the seats to press a light kiss to her lips. He'd asked her to give him a couple of days to put out more feelers about her mother, see what else his investigators could turn up, and promised that they would find .her

She'd nodded, swallowing hard as her fears for Patricia's safety .and emotional well-being came flooding back

With all the tension and animosity that had passed between Creed and herself over the years, she was amazed at how easy it was to put her faith in him. Their relationship might be shaky, as wispy thin as morning dew, but where her mother's disappearance was concerned, she trusted him implicitly

Then he'd done something that had shocked her even more than his spending the night with her. He'd told her he was coming over with dinner for both of them after work

She'd been too flustered and—yes, she admitted it—delighted to question why he didn't want to eat out at a restaurant, in public with her, or why he didn't invite her to his place. That he wanted to see her again was enough. See her, spend time with her, and if the look in his eyes at that moment was any indication, likely spend the night with her again, too

For as long as it lasted, she would take him however she could get him

Just the thought made her stomach do somersaults. She put a hand low on her belly in an attempt to still the internal acrobatics while she finished saying goodbye to her students as they gathered their books, jackets and lunchboxes, and raced for the buses outside the building waiting to take them home

After seeing them off and straightening her desk, she grabbed her own purse and a few papers she should look over for the next day's lessons, even though she suspected she wouldn't, and headed for her car

Only a few more hours before she would see Creed again. Before he walked into her house with an armful of take-out and settled in for a quiet dinner

He hadn't asked her what she wanted to eat, and she hadn't volunteered the information. But being forced to endure a meal she didn't care for would be a small price to pay for the satisfaction of being with Creed again. Even for just a short time

Six

For the tenth time in an hour, Creed checked his watch, cursing at how slowly the minutes seemed to tick by. He hadn't done a lick of Dakota Fortune business all day, concentrating instead on uncovering anything else he could about Patricia's whereabouts. Making phone calls, putting a couple more investigators on the case, following a few of his own leads and researching some of the information he already had

But through it all, in the back of his mind he'd been thinking about Maya and anticipating the hour when he could leave the office without arousing suspicion and head over to see her. Of course, he had a few errands to run on the way

.Dinner. He'd offered to bring dinner over to her place

He shook his head, confused and uncomfortable with how he found himself continually responding to her

The plain truth was he wanted to be with her. Their time together was limited, and deep in his gut he felt this urgency to store up as much of her as he could. When he had to walk away—and it would happen sooner rather than later—he wanted to have part of her deep under his skin to get him through the many long, lonely nights ahead

That's why he'd suggested dinner at her house. He couldn't very well take her out to a fancy restaurant, where anyone might see them together. Especially since he knew he was likely to be looking at her half the night as though he wanted to rip her clothes off

Ninety percent of the restaurant's patrons might not think anything of it, but it would only take the remaining ten percent—one person familiar with the Fortune family, one reporter, one

**gossip columnist—to create the very scandal he was trying so
.desperately to avoid**

**He didn't want her to be seen going in or out of his apartment,
either, for the very same reasons. Even though he lived on the top
floor of the Dakota Fortune building, and her presence there
might be accepted during business hours, after hours was a whole
.different story**

**Going to her place seemed the obvious choice. From there it had
.been a short jump to offering to bring dinner**

**Another glance at his watch showed only thirty more minutes
until he could safely sneak out and get on with what had been
.consuming his thoughts all day**

**Pushing back from his desk, he stood, scooped up a couple of files
he needed to drop off at his brother's office, and headed for the
door. He informed his assistant that he probably wouldn't be back
.before morning, then walked a short distance down the hall**

.Mr. Fortune." Case's assistant greeted him with a smile"

**He inclined his head in reply. "Debra. Is it all right if I go in, or is
"?he busy**

**He just got off the phone, so it should be all right, but let me "
".announce you**

**Creed let her, preferring to give Case fair warning of his arrival.
The last time he'd walked into his brother's office unannounced, it
had been to find Case and Gina entwined like weeds on top of the
desk, doing something Creed would have preferred never to
witness. He loved his brother and new sister-in-law as much as
anyone, but there were some things about their relationship he
.just didn't need to know firsthand**

**He'd backed silently out of the office and never mentioned the
incident to Case, but from that point on, he'd made sure to let**

Debra announce him or knock himself and wait for his brother to
.give him the all-clear

Rising from her chair, Debra crossed to a door identical to Creed's own, with a brass name plate labeling it the office of one of the copresidents of Dakota Fortune, and tapped softly, waiting for Case's muffled response. That she didn't simply open the door and walk right in made Creed wonder if she'd stumbled into an
.intimate moment or two between Case and Gina herself

Your brother is here to see you," she informed Case in a bright, "
.casual tone, leaning around the now-open door

Good," Creed heard his brother say, punctuated by what "
sounded like a pen being tossed down. "I could use an excuse not
".to deal with this report until tomorrow

Grinning, Creed strolled into his brother's office and took a seat in front of his desk, tossing the files in his hand on top of Case's already cluttered blotter. Behind him, he heard the click of the
.door as Debra closed it, ensuring the two brothers' privacy

I hate to break it to you, brother, but you're going to have more "
".than one report to deal with in the morning

".Case groaned. "Thanks a lot

Look," Creed said, getting down to business, "I'm taking off for "
the night, but I wanted to fill you in on some information I found
".out about Patricia, and why I think she ran off

His expression turning serious, Case listened as Creed told him about the extra private investigators he'd hired to look into their stepmother's disappearance and what they'd discovered about
.Wilton Blackstone still being alive

When he finished, Case shook his head and swore beneath his
".breath. "Dad won't be happy to hear any of that

I didn't tell him. And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't, either. Not "
yet, anyway. I don't want to get his—or anyone else's—hopes up

in case we're wrong about what we think is going on, and Patricia
".disappeared for some other reason

.Case nodded in understanding

Creed shifted in his seat, crossing one ankle on the opposite knee
and loosening the knot of his tie. "I've still got my guys looking
".into it, and looking for her

Good," Case murmured, his lips pressed into a solemn line. "
".Let's pray they find her

Silence filled the room, the minutes ticking by while Creed
focused on a spot outside the tall plate glass windows at his
brother's back. He felt Case's gaze on him, and knew his brother
.was waiting to hear what else he had to say

The problem was, Creed wasn't sure he should reveal the other
problem weighing so heavily on his mind. Case was his brother,
probably the person he was closest to in the world, but some
.things weren't meant to be shared with anyone

You might as well spit it out," Case said, reading Creed's mind—" or maybe just the tight lines he knew marked his face. "Get it off
".your chest so you can stop sulking about it

He wasn't sulking, but it sure did seem to occupy a fair chunk of
.his time these days

With a sigh, he let his foot fall to the floor and ran splayed hands
.through his hair, giving the ends a tug for good measure

.It's about Maya," he said finally"

"?Yeah? What about her"

".I'm sleeping with her"

He blurted it out quickly, like ripping off a bandage, before he
could change his mind, then waited for Case's stunned response.
He expected wide eyes, a dropped jaw, maybe a few choice

expletives as his brother kicked back his chair and stormed
.around the room

Instead Case remained perfectly still for one long minute. Then,
"?very slowly, he said, "Okay. How serious is it

Not...serious." Creed shook his head. "It can't be, not with the "
".way things are

.What things?" Case wanted to know"

Creed gave him a look hot enough to peel paint from the walls.
". "She's our sister, for God's sake

Stepsister," Case corrected, leaning back in his chair and "
adopting a less poised, more comfortable position. "Stepsister
from Dad's third marriage. She's not technically related to us. We
—you—don't share a single drop of blood with her, or a single
".strand of DNA

Does it matter?" Creed snapped, his brows knitting with "
annoyance. "She's still family. We grew up with her. Hell, she's
ten years younger than I am. For that reason alone, I never should
".have touched her

?So why did you"

.Leave it to his brother to cut right to the heart of the matter

He thought about it for a second. No way was he going to tell
Case that he'd been watching Maya for years, thinking decidedly
.unbrotherly thoughts about her ever since she'd hit puberty

I couldn't seem to help myself," he said instead, his insides "
.twisting at the admission

Case considered that for a minute, rocking back and forth in the
.soft leather of his executive desk chair

So what's the problem?" he asked. "Maya may be younger, but "
she's a grown woman. If she's as interested as you are, I don't
".understand why you'd be concerned

Muttering a low curse, Creed pushed to his feet and began to pace. "Do you know what would happen if word got out that a Fortune son was sleeping with his own stepsister? The press would have a field day. It could ruin the company, not to mention the humiliation it would cause for Dad and Patricia. And the rest of you...no one in the Fortune family would be safe from the ".gossip and disgrace

Do you really think that would happen? You and Maya aren't " related, no matter how the media might want to spin things. And even if they did their worst, if you're in love with her and the two of you want to be together, you have to know that this family would support you. We've weathered storms before and come out ".on top. We can do it again

Creed stopped a few steps from his brother's desk and absorbed what he was saying. It sounded good, exactly what he needed to hear. Exactly what he probably would have told Case if their .situations were reversed

.But that didn't make it any easier for him to believe

The only thing I would warn you against," his brother went on in " a grim tone, "is not to toy with Maya's affections. If you're not serious about her, then you should probably let her go and keep "...your distance. But if you are

Case took a deep breath, his lips quirking slightly. "If you are serious about her, and she's the woman you want to spend the ".rest of your life with, then don't let anything stand in your way

Creed scowled, not the least bit comforted by his brother's advice. If anything, it set him more on edge, making his stomach .clench with the acidic mix of conflicting emotions

Trust me on this, little brother," Case continued. "When a man " ".finds the right woman, he has to hang on to her with both hands

Are you speaking from experience?" Creed asked, already " .knowing the answer

His brother had been almost annoyingly chipper since his marriage to Gina, and it had only gotten worse since he found out he was going to be a father. And while Creed was happy for him, for them both, Case's good mood at the moment only made his own darker

Damn right I am," Case said proudly, grinning from ear to ear as " he leaned back in his chair, then sent it rocking silently on its springs

And if Maya makes you half as happy as Gina makes me, then " you'd be an idiot to let her get away. But if you're just using her as a temporary amusement..." He let the words hang in the air for a second, increasing their impact. "Well, I don't need to tell you ".how hot it will be when you get to Hell

One of Case's brows lifted pointedly, and he held Creed's gaze until Creed scrubbed a hand over his face and dropped back into one of the chairs in front of his brother's desk

After a tension-filled pause, Case sat forward in his own chair, leaning his arms on the edge of his desk. "Whatever you decide, ".Creed, I'll back you one hundred percent. You can count on that

Blowing out a breath, Creed nodded and pushed to his feet. "Thanks. I don't know if I feel any better about what's going on, ".but...thanks

A quick glance at his watch showed it was past time that he could get away with leaving the office and head over to Maya's to start dinner. His talk with Case tempted him to skip the visit altogether, but since the "date" had been his idea, he didn't feel right backing out at the last minute

I have to get going," he explained on the way to the door. " "Remember not to say anything to Dad or the others about what the investigators turned up. Hopefully we'll find out something more in a few days, but until then I want to keep it all under ".wraps

".You've got it. See you tomorrow"

Creed left his brother shuffling papers, muttering about the likelihood of drowning under the pile of reports now flooding his in-box, and made his way to the underground garage of the .Dakota Fortune building where his car was parked

He would stop at the store and pick up what he needed for the evening meal, then he'd head for Maya's house. The very thought .made his muscles tense right down to the soles of his feet

All day he'd been looking forward to seeing her again, being with her again. But after talking with his brother, he wasn't sure that .was the smartest move on his part

Case was right—he shouldn't string Maya along. If he wasn't serious about her, he should walk away, leave her alone, put the distance between them again that had been there the past twenty .years

And he wasn't serious about her. Couldn't be. The risks were too .great

Which meant he had to put an end to this...affair, relationship, lapse of judgment and giant mistake. He had to break it off, the .sooner the better

Sliding behind the wheel of his Mercedes, he started the engine and pretended not to feel the ball of dread that slid down his .throat and twisted his gut

The minute she heard Creed at the front door, Maya's heart .skipped a beat

She'd spent the past couple of hours lecturing herself to act normal, nonchalant, to not read more into his offer of dinner than there really was. After all, he could merely be feeling sorry for her, given her mother's continued absence and the news he'd

delivered yesterday about her father not being deceased as she'd
.been led to believe

She didn't want to think that was the case, but had to admit it
.was a distinct possibility

He knocked again, and she rushed to let him in, not wanting him
.to think even for a second that he wasn't entirely welcome

Hi," she said, smiling and a little breathless from her race "
.through the house

He stepped inside, a large paper sack in one arm, but didn't
return her smile. Instead his dark eyes barely met hers and lines
bracketed his flattened lips. An aura of tension radiated from him
.in waves

Her senses immediately went on red alert, her spine going rigid
.as she braced herself for the worst

"?...What is it?" she asked in a hoarse whisper. "Mom...is she"

His expression indicated confusion and then just as quickly
cleared. "No. God, no. I'm sorry," he said with a shake of his
head, "my mind was on something else, something from work. I
haven't heard anything else about Patricia yet. I'm sorry if I
".scared you

Stale oxygen poured from her lungs in one long exhalation.
". "Thank goodness

Creed still looked distracted as he moved ahead of her and
walked to the kitchen. She was so relieved that nothing had
happened to her mother—that they knew about, anyway—that she
.ignored his apparent bad mood and simply followed him

He set the bag on the counter, then shrugged out of his suit
jacket and tie. Laying them over the back of one of the four chairs
surrounding the small round table, he loosened his collar and
rolled up the sleeves of his pale-blue dress shirt before beginning
.to remove items from the sack

What are we having?" she asked. It was hard to tell from the " nondescript cartons and containers stamped with the name of an upscale downtown eatery or from the mingled scents wafting .from them. All she knew was that it smelled good

I'm not sure. I told them to throw together a full-course meal " ".with a little of everything

Instead of a separate container for each dish, the plates the restaurant provided came already arranged, the way they would if .they were dining in

Want to grab some forks and glasses?" Creed suggested while " he popped the lids off, then reached into the bag for a bottle of .wine before setting everything else aside

Sure." Glad to have something to keep her busy, she turned for " the cupboards, returning a moment later with everything they .would need

Handing him a corkscrew for the wine, she folded cloth napkins for each place setting, adding silverware to both. He filled their .glasses, then took a seat at the head of the table

She swallowed, fighting a return of the nerves that had plagued her even before he'd arrived. Having him look at her like that...so intense, so focused...made her feel on display. As though she'd just had one of those dreams where she showed up at work stark .naked

It surprised her that the skittishness hadn't lessened, now that she and Creed were sleeping together. She'd always thought that when two people became intimate with each other they started to .feel more comfortable together, not less

But for her the opposite seemed to be true. Making love with him .had opened her to a whole new set of insecurities

She worried that she would do or say the wrong thing and somehow send their relationship back to the way it had been

before—with him treating her as either invisible or a nuisance,
.and her avoiding him as much as possible

Most of all, though, she found herself on constant alert for the
moment when everything would come crashing down around her.
It was inevitable, she knew that, but waiting for it to happen,
.never knowing when the blow might come, made her jittery

Have you found out anything more about Mom?” she asked, “
.taking a seat beside him

He shook his head. “I was on the phone all day, but so far,
nothing. They understand the importance of the situation,
”.though, so I do believe they’ll find something soon

”.I hope so“

It smells delicious,” she murmured, turning her attention to the “
.meal in front of her

They ate for a few minutes in silence, then, without warning, he
put his utensils down and fixed his gaze on her. Startled by his
sudden, intense focus, she froze, sitting back a little as she raised
.her eyes to his

What?” she asked, feeling like the proverbial bug under a “
.microscope

”.Maya“

His voice was low, gentle, and the bottom dropped out of her
stomach. Whatever he was about to say, it couldn’t be good if he
.was using that tone on her

Oh, God,” she said, her chest growing too tight for anything “
.else

He winced at her response, his hands balling into fists where they
.rested on the table, on either side of his plate

”.Maya,” he said again. “We need to talk“

Seven

T his was it, she thought. The shoe she'd been waiting to have fall, the rug she'd been expecting to have yanked out from under .her

He was going to break up with her. Tell her that it had been fun, a temporary diversion, but now it was time for things to return to normal, for them to go back to being nothing more than .stepsiblings

She tried to regulate her breathing, slowly in and out through her nose, but her lungs refused to function properly. Her vision blurred, her mind spinning a mile a minute. He opened his mouth .to speak, and she braced for the impact his words would have

A second later, though, his lips met...parted...met again, as though he was rethinking what he'd been about to say, or trying .to come up with the best way to say it

Shaking his head, he muttered something beneath his breath, too .low for her to hear, then picked up his fork and started to eat

Maya sat in stunned silence. He ate several bites of his dinner, his .concentration focused entirely on chewing

I've been thinking," he said finally, resting his forearms on the " .edge of the table and tipping his head slightly in her direction

Sucking in another breath, she waited, wishing he would just get .it over with

".Maybe we should try looking for Patricia ourselves"

Dammit, that wasn't what he'd meant to say. He'd meant to tell her that going to bed together had been a mistake. That it couldn't happen again and they needed to stay away from each .other as much as possible

"?Excuse me"

**His grip on his fork tightened as she stared blankly at him. He
.couldn't blame her. Tonight wasn't going at all as he'd planned**

**He never should have come over, but now that he'd started down
.this road, he didn't have much choice but to follow through**

**Doing his best to act naturally, he resumed eating, but at a slower
.pace this time**

**You know your mother better than anyone. I'll keep my "
investigators on the case, looking into every lead, working to
track her down however they can. But maybe it's not such a bad
idea for the two of us to take some of their information and go
looking ourselves. Two more people out there, pounding the
pavement, can't hurt. And if we manage to find her, I can't
imagine that your mother would want to see anyone more than
".she'd want to see you**

**It took a full minute for her to digest his words. "All right," she
finally responded. "Whatever I can do to help. But...if that was all
"?you were going to suggest, why did you make it sound so dire**

**Without meeting her gaze, he shrugged a shoulder, reaching for
his wineglass and taking a long, fortifying sip. "I wasn't sure how
".you'd feel about taking a few days off work**

**It wasn't true, but it sounded good. And what choice did he have
now that he'd brought up the idea of trying to track down her
?mother themselves**

**If you think it will help, and that we actually stand a chance of "
finding her, of course I'll take a few days. I can call tonight and
".get tomorrow off, or even the rest of the week if we need it**

**He nodded. "I'll call the private investigators in the morning and
find out where they think we should start looking first. Wear
something comfortable," he added, his lips quirking upward in a
".small smile. "We could be in for a very long day**

They passed the rest of the meal making only light, casual conversation. Nothing too deep, nothing too personal. It felt awkward to Maya, but that was a state she was rapidly becoming used to whenever Creed was around

After they finished eating, he helped her clear the table and put the leftovers in the refrigerator for later. Then he moved to retrieve the wine, holding her glass out to her as he lifted his own to his lips

Thank you," she murmured. She took the glass but didn't drink. "She'd had two full glasses of the rich pinot noir already. Any more and she was likely to get tipsy

Tipsy around Creed wasn't good. He already put her too much off balance as it was. Drunk, she'd be lucky if she could string two words together without sounding like a bumbling idiot

Dinner was delicious," she said while she still had the capacity "to function within normal ranges. "Thank you again for bringing it ".over

Rather than answer, he inclined his head. Tossing back the last of his wine, he set the glass onto the counter with a soft clink, then crossed the kitchen to gather his tie and jacket

I should get going," he said, slipping the silk tie around his neck "but leaving it hanging on either side of his collar, and draping the jacket over his arm

She placed her own half-full glass beside his, smoothing the palms of her hands down the sides of her skirt as she followed him to the front door

I'll swing by around nine o'clock tomorrow to pick you up. That "should give me time to talk to my contacts, get some leads and ".make arrangements to be out of the office for a couple of days
I'll be ready," she said with confidence"

Creed opened the door and took one step out, pausing on the darkened stoop. Only a sliver of moonlight and the occasional porch or streetlamp punctuated the blanket of black that surrounded the neighborhood

Moving a few inches to the side, she flipped the wall switch for her own porch light so he wouldn't have to walk to the car in total darkness

Thank you again." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, "glancing down at the ground before meeting his eyes once again. "For dinner and hiring the extra private investigators and... everything. It's made this whole situation a little less awful for a ".while

In the dim lighting, she couldn't be sure, but she thought he offered a small smile

".You're welcome"

Stepping forward, he wrapped a hand gently around her arm, just above the elbow, and leaned in. His warm breath danced over her face, and she could smell the musky, attractive scent of his cologne

".Good night, Maya. Sleep well"

Her lips parted, and she tried to respond. But the minute his mouth brushed her cheek in a soft good-night kiss, every thought in her head dried up like a single drop of water in the midday heat of the Sahara Desert

Creed straightened, and this time, even in the dark, she could see the blaze in his eyes, the stern set of his jaw

Her heart lurched, and she felt it all the way to her toes. She licked her suddenly dry lips, her fingers going wide at her sides, as though bracing herself. For what, exactly, she wasn't sure

His grip on her arm tightened, and then he shook his head, sharply

**Dammit,” he grated, a second before grabbing her other arm, “
.dragging her forward and covering her mouth with his own**

**The kiss stole her breath, seared her soul. She could have sworn
her lips were burned away, leaving a path of ashes down through
.the center of her body**

**Everywhere he touched, she tingled. From her elbows to her
fingertips, where she grasped the sleeves of his jacket. The tips of
her breasts that pressed to his chest. The front of her thighs
.brushing the front of his**

**He readjusted the slant of his mouth, giving himself better access
and allowing him to deepen the kiss. Their tongues tangled,
.working them both into a lather of unrepressed need**

**Striding forward, he moved into the house again, forcing her to
shuffle backward. He kicked the door closed with his foot, the
.slam reverberating through the room and through her**

**But he didn’t stop there. Instead he continued stalking forward,
.one long, slow step at a time, until she hit the opposite wall**

**Spreading his feet on the outside of hers, he pressed his body
flush against her own. Flares of heat burst again in her
bloodstream, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing
.them closer**

**His hands moved from her arms to her waist, then slid around to
cup her buttocks. When he urged her hips up, she went willingly,
reveling in the hard ridge of his erection, pressed sharply
.between her legs**

**She was gasping, groaning, and she knew he was with her
because he was doing the same. Fisting the hem of her skirt in
both hands, he drew the material up, bunching it at her waist.
Then he delved beneath and tore her pantyhose and underwear
.down to her knees**

While he fumbled with his own belt and zipper, she wiggled until she could shed the stockings entirely. As soon as his pants dropped and he reached for her, she was ready, lifting her legs to .wrap around his waist

He slid into her in one slick, smooth glide, making them both gasp at the friction and intense pleasure of finally being linked the way .she suspected they'd both been wanting and anticipating all day

Tugging at the back of his head, she pulled him down for a kiss. Lower, he was moving, stroking, thrusting, pounding into her. She slammed into the wall again and again, but she couldn't have .cared less. The wall could take it, and so could she

Strengthening her grip at both his neck and waist, she joined him in the powerful, rocking give and take. Only seconds later, she stiffened in climax. Pleasure ripped through her, making her cry out. Her nails dug like talons into his shoulders as she fought .desperately to keep her balance and her consciousness

Inside her, Creed pulsed and thrust one last time before joining her with a shout of completion. Long minutes later she felt his muscles go as lax as her own and let her legs slide weightlessly to .the floor

Clearing her throat, she did her best to get her voice working again. "I'll cook next time," she said just above his ear in barely a ".whisper. "I was thinking breakfast...if you want to stay the night

A shudder rolled through him, and he lifted his head to stare down at her. For a beat, his face remained impassive. Then his blue eyes began to sparkle, one corner of his mouth tugging .upward in a grin

".Sounds good to me"

She smiled as he dragged his pants up and fastened the top button, then broke into a full-out laugh when he scooped her up .in his arms and headed for the stairs

I'm going to want bacon," he told her, the words rumbling " through her as she bumped against his chest with each step. ". "And eggs. Maybe pancakes

He carried her into the bedroom, tossed her to the middle of the .wide mattress and followed her down

I can do that," she murmured just as his lips captured hers and " he got the blood pumping heavily through her veins all over .again

Creed lay awake long into the night, chastising himself seven ways from Sunday, while Maya slept at his side, curled so snugly .against him they might have shared skin

He tried to be annoyed, tried to convince himself that she was clinging, that he'd rather be in his own apartment, in his own bed .—alone—than here with her

But the truth was, this had all been more his doing than hers. He'd been the one unable to resist her soft eyes or the pale, kissable bow of her lips. He'd been the one who couldn't walk away, crossing back over the threshold into her house to take her .none too gently against the kitchen wall

It was everything he shouldn't have done, but he couldn't seem to .work up a shred of apology

Damn, damn, damn. He cursed silently, using a few other, more- .creative four-letter words as they came to mind

This definitely hadn't been part of the plan when he'd knocked on her door this evening. After talking with Case before leaving the Dakota Fortune offices, he'd fully intended to tell her that what had happened between them before couldn't happen again. It had been a lapse, a mistake, the result of a moment—two moments— of weakness, and they had to go back to being only stepbrother .and stepsister

All that and more had been on the tip of his tongue when they sat down to eat. His gut had clenched, but he'd been determined to .go through with it, to charge ahead and just get it over with

And then...he couldn't do it. He'd taken one look in her eyes—at her stricken curious, wary expression, and his throat had gone .stone dry

He was going to burn for it—his brother was right about that—but damned if he could keep his hands off her. The minute his lips had brushed her cheek in what was supposed to be an innocent, brotherly, goodbye peck, he'd known it wasn't enough and had to .have more

Now look where he was. In her bed—again. Spending the night— .again. Making love with her—again and again and again

.He could almost feel the flames of damnation licking at his heels

.But then, it was a hell of a way to go

Maya shifted at his side in her sleep, and he glanced down, admiring her simple beauty. Her glossy black hair fell over her shoulder and down her back, framing a face any artist would kill to paint, with its high cheekbones and smooth, bronze .complexion

Her body was another work of art, one he'd explored and ...memorized every inch of it with his eyes, his hands, his mouth

He didn't want to give that up anytime soon, that was for sure, no matter what his punishment might be later, either in this world or .the next

So maybe it was for the best that he was sticking around. He wouldn't exactly get an award for Man of the Year, but judging by some of her behavior tonight, she was still very vulnerable where .Patricia's disappearance was concerned

Her panic when he'd first arrived and she'd misread his mood had been enough to convince him she wasn't handling the situation

quite as well as she wanted everyone to believe. She was obviously very concerned—as they all were—and petrified that something had happened, or would happen, to her mother before .they could find her

She needed someone right now, and it looked like he was .destined to be that person

He hadn't planned it, he didn't even want it, but that's the way .things appeared to be playing out

For now, he would stick around. He would let things carry on as they had been and hope that nothing hit the fan because of it. If they were careful, no one—Fortune family and the press alike— .ever needed to know. And he would deal with the rest later

After they found Patricia, which he strongly believed they would, he and Maya would go their separate ways, resume their normal lives, never letting anyone so much as suspect that things .between them had ventured down a forbidden path

Hopefully, he wouldn't have any trouble convincing her that it .was best for both of them

Having made that decision, and what peace he could with it for the time being, he pulled the sheet a little higher over them both and closed his eyes, finally sinking into the deep sleep that had .eluded him the past few hours

Maya awoke to kisses being feathered down the side of her neck and over her breasts. It was the most delightful transition into .wakefulness she could ever remember experiencing

Moments later Creed rolled her to her back and wished her good .morning in a most improper manner

Not that she minded. In fact, from the noises she made while he pleased her from head to toe, it appeared she approved very, .very much

**After that, she showered and dressed, then went downstairs to
.start breakfast while he did the same**

**With her hair still damp and left to air dry, she moved around the
kitchen, lining an iron skillet with strips of bacon, cracking eggs
.and mixing batter for pancakes**

**She couldn't remember the last time she'd cooked such a large
meal. Certainly not for herself. A bowl of cereal or slice of toast
and glass of orange juice usually sufficed on her way out the door
.to work**

**But she liked the smells wafting from her stove, enjoyed the task
of stirring, beating, turning and making sure that everything
cooked properly without burning. By the time Creed came
downstairs, dressed in the same suit he'd worn the day before,
she was humming and piling two plates with what looked like
.enough food for an army**

**He stopped in the entryway to the kitchen, tightening his tie and
smoothing the wrinkles from the sleeves of his suit jacket. She
was tempted to offer to iron it for him, but thought that might be
a little too domestic for whatever was going on between them and
.wasn't sure he would appreciate the gesture**

.Something smells good," he remarked"

**Smiling, she carried the plates to the table and set them down,
.then proceeded to fill two tall glasses with orange juice**

**Bacon, eggs and pancakes, as requested," she said. When he "
didn't move, she waved her hand. "Come over here and eat
before it gets cold. You did say you wanted to get an early start
"?looking for Patricia, right**

**He nodded, taking a seat in the same spot as he had for dinner
the night before. After a few bites he murmured his approval and
.offered her a small smile**

".This is really good," he told her. "I didn't know you could cook"

**She shot him a cockeyed glance, chuckling. "I do have to eat, you
.know. And I don't enjoy take-out enough to eat it every day**

**Wish I could say the same, but sometimes eating out or ordering "
.in is just easier**

**They both cleaned their plates, and this time when Creed helped
her clear the table, he let her slip the dishes into the dishwasher
.for later rather than insisting on doing them by hand**

**She knew it was because he wanted to get on the road and start
the search for her mother. He needed to make a few phone calls
first, though, to the private investigators he had on her mother's
.case**

**While he used the phone in the kitchen, she wandered around the
house, hardly listening to his side of the conversation as she
gathered some items she thought they might need. A sweater and
her purse, a six-pack of bottled water, fresh fruit and some
nutrition bars. She didn't know how long they would be gone or
how often they'd be able to stop, and wanted to have at least
.something on hand to eat and drink**

**She'd taken care of the issue of a substitute to cover her classes
last night. It had meant calling the woman in charge of those
things from her bedside phone, trying to sound sick enough to
require time off work while Creed had done his best to make her
.moan in ecstasy, but she'd gotten her authorization**

**If need be, she thought she could even get the whole rest of the
week off. She just hoped it wouldn't come to that. She would
much rather find her mother right away and be able to bring her
.home, where she belonged**

**Several minutes later he hung up the phone and met her at the
.front door**

.How did it go?" she asked"

**Good. I have at least a few leads we can follow up on. Places “
”.your mother might have used her credit cards and such**

A thrill of anticipation and hope swept through her. She said a quick prayer that they might actually find her mother today, even though she knew the chances were fairly slim. If Patricia was out there, able to be easily located, then the investigators Nash and .Creed had both hired surely would have tracked her down by now

But there was a chance, and she felt better simply taking a more .active role in discovering her mother’s whereabouts

Eight

T twelve hours later Maya was exhausted and her optimism was .definitely waning

They’d driven what seemed like thousands of miles, and she was pretty sure they’d crossed the state of South Dakota at least .twice in their effort to track down Patricia Fortune

It was possible her mother had left the state, but since none of Creed’s leads specifically led them to believe that was the case, they’d stuck to exploring areas that Patricia could be linked to: the town where Patricia had been born and raised; the reservation where she’d lived with Wilton Blackstone when they were first married, before Patricia had taken a young Maya and run away; and any number of tiny, out-of-the-way places in .between

Stopping only briefly for lunch and the occasional bathroom .break, she and Creed had both gone on almost until they dropped

She was glad he was driving, because she could barely keep her eyes open. As it was, she found herself raising a hand to cover .her yawns every few minutes

The sun had long since set, and the city of Sioux Falls was lit up with colorful neon signs and the intermittent lights of tall office buildings where some people were obviously working overtime. Traffic was thankfully thin, and except for a few red lights, they were able to skirt the deepest parts of downtown on the way to her town house

Creed pulled up to the curb, leaving the engine running as he turned to face her. He looked just as tired as she felt, his eyes heavy, the lines of his face deeper than when they'd started out that morning

I think it would be best if I spent the night at my place," he said, "his voice gritty with fatigue. "I need a long, hot shower and change of clothes before we start out again tomorrow. Will you be"?all right by yourself

She unlatched her safety belt and unlocked the passenger-side door. "Of course. We could both use a good night's sleep

He glanced down, grimacing at the expensive Italian suit that was now more wrinkled than a Shar-Pei puppy. "Yeah, I'll wear something a bit more comfortable tomorrow

What time will you be picking me up in the morning?" she "wanted to know

"Is six too early"

She stifled a groan at what sounded like an ungodly hour, but said, "No. I'll be ready

Stepping out of the car, she turned back and leaned down to meet his gaze. "Thank you for today. I really do appreciate it, and I know Mom would, too

He gave a rough nod, remaining silent

"Good night"

"Night," he said softly"

She closed the car door and made her way up the steps to the front of the house. She hadn't left the porch light on when they left that morning, so she moved slowly up the steps and used the tiny pen light attached to her key ring to unlock the door

Creed remained at the curb, his Mercedes idling softly, until she'd gotten inside, locked the door behind her and waved from the kitchen window to let him know she was all right. She couldn't tell for sure, but she thought he raised a hand to wave back before pulling away

The old Creed, the one she'd known half her life, wouldn't have been as considerate. Oh, he'd have made sure she got home safely, but once he'd dropped her off, she'd have likely been on her own

This Creed, the new one, as she was coming to think of him ever since they'd begun this strange, tentative new relationship, seemed more considerate, more compassionate

With her, at least. With his family, he'd always been happy and outgoing, but with her he'd always acted more gruff and closed off

She didn't know what had changed, exactly, except for her mother's sudden disappearance. But even then, her mother had been missing for months now, whereas he had only started coming around and being more courteous with her recently

It was probably just the sex, she thought, making her way through the house. She left her purse and jacket in the kitchen, knowing she would need them again first thing in the morning, then headed upstairs. With each step, she loosened another item of clothing, making it easier for her to strip and fall straight into bed

The minute she hit the mattress, she sighed with relief. She would have no trouble falling asleep tonight, as tired as she was

Since Creed was her first lover, she couldn't claim to be an expert in the field of sex and how it affected people's personalities. But it was the only thing she could put her finger on that might explain why Creed's attitude toward her had changed. Not suddenly, but enough to be noticeable

And truth be told, she didn't care. Even if he was only being nice to her and doing all of this to help find her mother because he either felt guilty for sleeping with her at all, or because he acted this way with all the women he slept with, she was simply grateful. And if it didn't last...well, she would deal with that when the time came, she supposed

For now, though, she found great strength in his presence and support. Her life had been so strained and stressful lately, it felt good to be able to lean on him a bit. It felt good to not be quite so alone

She had never really been alone, she knew that. The rest of the Fortunes, especially Nash, were as upset and concerned about Patricia as she was. But since she'd always felt like an outsider thrown into the middle of the close-knit Fortune clan, and because she and her mother were so close, she'd felt especially isolated since Patricia had gone missing

Creed made her feel as though someone understood what she was going through, and that there might be a light at the end of the tunnel

It was difficult not to let her heart and imagination read more into his behavior than there was. Already she could feel herself slipping, feel herself wanting to believe she was in love with him—really in love with him, not merely suffering the residual effects of her childhood crush—and that he might come to love her, too

But each time her mind started to flit off into those flights of fancy, she tried her best to rein it in and once again plant both feet firmly in reality

No matter what happened, she decided, as she began to drift off, she could never be sorry for giving him her virginity...and her heart

.Even if he wasn't willing to give her his in return

Bright and early the next day they set out again in search of her mother. This time they had a list of some of Patricia's acquaintances, both past and present, and also decided to stop at every hotel and motel they came across in their travels, on the off chance a woman fitting Patricia's description had checked in or out or been seen in the area

By noon, Maya was once again wiped out and didn't know how she could possibly go another six or eight hours. She was also beginning to feel as though the search for her mother was a lost cause and they would all have to just sit back and wait for Patricia to return on her own

The only thing that kept her going was the fear that her mother might really be in trouble and need help. Until Maya knew for sure what was going on, she couldn't stop looking

.How about some lunch?" Creed cut into her thoughts to ask"

He was dressed more casually today, in a pair of tan chinos and a light blue cotton button-down shirt. From her side of the car, though, he looked just as weary and frustrated as she felt

Sounds good," she said, thinking that a bite to eat and a gallon " or two of caffeine were exactly what they needed to get through the rest of the day

They found a nice sit-down restaurant that seemed to cater to families, and parked near the front entrance

Creed laid a hand at the small of her back, sending shivers of awareness up and down her spine as they walked inside. He kept it there until the hostess had seen them to their seats, only

letting his arm drop when they slid into opposite sides of the low booth. A waitress brought menus and took their drink orders, leaving them alone again

I was hoping we'd have found something by now," he said as " they studied the list of lunch specials

Me, too. I just can't believe that no one has seen or heard from " Mom at all. She's not the type of person I would have expected to ".be able to disappear without a trace

Creed's mouth turned down in a frown. "Yeah. It's not like she's a ".ninja or ghost for the CIA or something

Even though the situation was far from amusing, that made her chuckle. "No, she's definitely neither of those things, but she sure ".is doing a good job of staying hidden

The waitress reappeared then to deliver two tall glasses of iced tea and finish jotting down their orders

Are you sure there isn't anything you can remember that might " give us a better idea of where to look?" he asked as soon as the woman left

Her brows knit, every muscle in her body tensing. Taking a breath, she forced herself to relax, knowing he didn't mean the question to sound like an accusation. They were both frustrated and worried and grabbing at any straw they could find that might lead them to Patricia

No, I'm sorry," she said with a shake of her head. Reaching for " her tea, she took a sip before continuing. "She never said anything to me about leaving. Nothing that would have made me think going away was in her plans or that might hint at her whereabouts. Honestly, Creed, I'm as confused about all this as ".you are

Their sandwiches arrived, and they ate in silence for a while. Then Maya set down her sandwich and said, "You have to understand

that all of this has come as a huge shock for me. Mom's running off was bad enough, but then you drop the bomb on me that my father is still alive. I had no idea, and if my mother could keep that information a secret all these years, then she certainly could have refrained from letting anything slip about her plans to leave ".town

Creed nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "It definitely came as a ".shock

Poor Nash. He's beside himself with worry. I feel so bad for him. " ".And he really does love my mother

".Yes. He does"

My father—Wilton—didn't, I don't think. Maybe at one time, but " from everything I remember of him, he was drunk and violent most of the time. Any little thing could set him off, and he always ".took his anger out on Mom

.Did he ever hit you?" Creed asked"

She shook her head and swallowed what had turned out to be a delicious sandwich. "Not that I remember. I remember the yelling and hitting, Mom crying. There were a lot of times when she'd send me to my room so I wouldn't see what was going on, or take me away from the house for a while until the worst of one of Wilton's rages had blown over. Then one day, she sat me down, explained that my father had died, and told me we were going ".away

Where did your mother take you when she wanted to get you " away from your father's temper?" he asked before biting into a .crunchy chip

Different places," she said with a shrug. "It was always off the " reservation, because if we'd stayed there and he came looking for us, he would have found us in no time. So she would take me to the library in town, or sometimes to the park. We didn't have

much money, so anywhere we went had to be extremely cheap or
".free

The town outside the reservation," he murmured. "Would that "
happen to be one of the small towns we drove through yesterday
"?on the way there and back

"?Yes, I think so," she told him slowly. "Why"

We didn't check there. There was no reason to. But if Patricia is "
running scared, hiding from Wilton, maybe she went to one of the
".places where she used to feel safe

A lump formed in Maya's throat, and she didn't think she could
take another bite if she tried. Laying her sandwich carefully on
.the plate, she used the napkin from her lap to wipe her hands

"?Do you really think so"

I don't know," he replied, mimicking her actions and then "
reaching into his pocket for his wallet. "But it's worth checking
".out

He threw a large bill on the table, more than enough to cover the
cost of their meals and a generous tip, before sliding out of the
"?bench seat. "Were you finished

Even if she hadn't been, she suspected he probably would have
dragged her out anyway. But she nodded eagerly and hurried to
her feet, any sense of hunger or weariness gone in her
anxiousness to get back on the road and check the two new
.places her mother might have gone

It took them nearly an hour to reach Delmont. The Yankton Indian
Reservation was only a few miles farther southwest, but they
.weren't going that far

Driving slowly down the main street of town, Maya studied all the
shop fronts and side streets, racking her brain for memories from
the past. Some things looked more familiar than others, but she

couldn't be sure if it was from her childhood or because they'd
.driven through only the day before

Do you remember how to get to the library?" Creed asked, "
.keeping a hawk's eye on the sidewalks and people bustling by
".No. It's been too long. Maybe we could stop and ask someone"

Instead they drove around a while longer until they spotted a
blue-and-white sign with an arrow and the image of a person
.reading a book. Two signs later they were at the library

It was a small brick building with brightly colored flowers lining a
short concrete walk. The parking lot was large enough for only
about three cars, and the tires of Creed's Mercedes ground loudly
.on the gravel as they pulled up

Looks like it's open," he said as they got out of the car and "
.spotted the hours of operation posted inside one of the windows

He pulled open the swinging glass door, then held it while she
stepped inside. Although it had been many years and the setup of
the library had changed, memories of being here with her mother
.flooded Maya

Like libraries everywhere, the room was hushed and quiet. There
was a woman sitting behind a long counter, carding books, and a
couple of kids on the floor in one corner, flipping through picture
.books while their mother perused cookbooks at a nearby table

You look over there," he whispered, pointing to the right. "I'll "
".check things out over here

Moving in opposite directions, they walked up and down the rows
of neatly lined stacks and peeked into several auxiliary rooms.
They met back where they'd started, each shaking their head to
.show they hadn't found Patricia

".Let me ask the librarian if she's seen your mother"

Striding to the circulation desk, Creed smiled as the woman
.stopped what she was doing and stood

.Can I help you?" she asked"

Yes. I'm looking for someone and wondered if you'd seen her." "
He pulled a photo from the back pocket of his pants and showed it
.to her

The woman studied it for a second, her brows knitting together in
contemplation. "I don't...well, maybe. Yes, yes, I think she might
have been in here. The hair isn't quite right," she continued,
handing the picture back, "but if this is the woman I'm thinking
of, she comes in quite a bit. She never checks out any books, but
she'll sit right over there and read for hours, and sometimes she
takes one of our on-your-honor paperbacks. She always brings
".them back, too, before taking the next

At the woman's words, Maya's heart picked up its pace. She
moved forward until she was standing directly beside Creed,
whose own tall frame fairly vibrated with excitement. On top of
the counter, his long fingers curled into fists while she twisted her
.hands together at her waist

.When was the last time she came in?" Creed wanted to know"

This morning. She only stayed for a bit, and took another book "
".with her

"?Do you have any idea where she might have gone"

.No, I'm sorry," the woman said, shaking her head sadly"

All right," he said with a sigh. "You've been very helpful, thank "
".you

Putting a hand on Maya's back, he steered her toward the door
.and outside

What do we do now?" she asked, going to the passenger side of "
.the car and sliding in as Creed did the same

I say we drive around, looking for her, maybe stop and ask a few “ more people if they’ve seen her. If nothing turns up, we can always come back here and stake out the place. Patricia’s bound “.to come back to return that book she borrowed

Her stomach was doing flips and she couldn’t seem to stop fidgeting. “Do you really think the woman the librarian has been ”?seeing is Mom

I don’t know,” he replied, starting the engine and pulling slowly “ out of the parking lot, “but we’re going to stick around until we “.find out for sure

For the next thirty minutes they drove around town, up and down every street, looking for anyone who looked even remotely like Patricia. They stopped several times to double-check women they saw on the sidewalk, and even more often to run into small businesses to flash Patricia’s picture and ask if anyone had seen .her recently

Frustration started to seep through her again, but she fought it off, reminding herself of Creed’s plan to stake out the library, if .necessary

She was scanning the area, turning her head from one side to the .other, when something caught her attention

”!Stop“

Creed slammed on the breaks, and only after the car came to a screeching halt did Maya bother to glance in the side mirror and .heave a sigh of relief that no one was driving behind them

”?What?” he wanted to know. “What did you see“

I’m not sure, but...” She raised a hand and pointed out the “ windshield. “I think that might be the park she used to take me “.to

It was straight ahead, tucked along a side street and taking up about two full blocks. As they pulled closer and eased into a

parallel parking space along the curb, she saw a swing set, jungle gym, sand box and even a small basketball court

A dozen children ran around, playing, yelling, having a grand old time. Teenagers in ratty clothes and backward baseball caps dribbled balls, rode skateboards and sat in small clutches sneaking cigarettes. The number of adults was at a minimum, and she suspected those belonged more to the younger kids than the older ones

As soon as Creed cut the engine, she unbuckled her seat belt and jumped out. He met her at the front of the car

“Do you see her?” he asked

She scanned the park’s inhabitants again. “No. But the park is pretty large, and she probably wouldn’t want to be close to all this noise and activity, anyway. Let’s walk around

She was getting used to him touching her, both casually and with firm intent, so she didn’t think anything of it when he placed a hand at the small of her back and let her move ahead of him. But when that hand slid to her elbow, then down her arm to clasp her hand, she nearly jumped. Holding hands wasn’t something she was used to, not with Creed

Now wasn’t the time to analyze the gesture, though. She could do that later, after they’d—God willing—found her mother

Still holding his hand, she started forward, entering the park and immediately beginning to scan faces. They passed the main play area and walked toward a more secluded spot with small trees, decorative flower beds, and benches where people could sit to read or enjoy the nice summer weather

Several yards ahead, there was a woman sitting on one of the benches, her back to them. She was slender, with short dark hair, and wearing a pale-pink lightweight sweater over a white blouse. Both looked well worn and oft washed. As they passed, Maya noticed the woman was reading a thick paperback novel

They were getting closer, she thought with a tiny sigh. They'd found the park her mother had brought her to as a child, and they'd found a woman reading a book. If they were lucky, maybe .the next reader they came across in this park would be Patricia

Unfortunately, as they finished searching the park fifteen minutes later, she had to give up any hope of getting lucky. Her mother .was nowhere to be found

Following the same path they'd taken through the park, they once again passed the woman reading. She didn't pay any attention to them, but as she lifted a hand to turn to the next page of her book, the thin gold bracelet on her right wrist glinted in the .afternoon sun, and Maya stopped in her tracks

".Oh, my God. Mom"

Nine

I f it hadn't been for the bracelet, which Maya identified as one of Patricia's favorites, she never would have recognized the woman .sitting on the bench as her mother

Her hair was both darker and much shorter than it had been before she'd run away. Patricia had always kept regular salon .appointments, her stylish bob almost a trademark

But since she'd been gone, she'd apparently cut her hair herself. It was spiky and a bit uneven, and looked as though she'd colored it—two shades darker than her natural tone—with one of those .box kits sold at every drugstore

Maya squeezed Creed's fingers once, hard, before releasing him and racing forward. At her breathless exclamation, the woman on the park bench raised her head and gasped, eyes going wide, .book sliding from her limp hands to fall to the ground

Mom! Oh, my God, Mom, we've been so worried." She threw her " .arms around Patricia, hugging her tight

They sat that way for a very long time, laughing, crying, rocking together. When they finally pulled apart, Maya wiped the tears from her face with her sleeve, refusing to let go of her mother's .hands for even a second, afraid she would slip away again

Patricia's own face was damp and blotchy, twin trails of wetness .continuing to roll down her cheeks

What are you doing here?" her mother asked, her voice rough " "?with emotion. "How did you find me

Maya turned her gaze to Creed, who stood only a few inches away. She could see the relief in his eyes, along with a light .frown to his brow and the line of concern thinning his lips

Turning back to her mother, she said, "We've been looking for you for weeks now. We've all been so worried, and Nash is beside ".himself

Patricia's own lips quivered, her lashes glittering with fresh tears. "You shouldn't have come. I can't go back, and I don't want you ".to get involved

It's all right," Maya assured her, patting the back of her " mother's hand. "We know everything. Or almost everything. We know about Wilton—that he's still alive and has been blackmailing "?you. That is why you ran away, isn't it

At Maya's revelation, Patricia shuddered, the moisture gathered in her eyes spilling over. She threw herself once again into her .daughter's arms and cried as if her life was ending

When she finally calmed enough to straighten, her breathing was .ragged, her chest hitching as she tried to compose herself

I'm sorry. Sorry I lied to you and ran away, and...I'm so sorry for " ".everything

It's all right. We understand." She cast a quick glance over her " shoulder at Creed to make sure he was still there, still offering his complete support. "No one is mad at you, I promise. We were all just worried about you, and afraid for you, and missed you very ".much

Creed stepped forward, taking a seat on the bench on the other side of Patricia. "It really will be all right, Patricia. We're here to ".take you home

No, I can't," Patricia said resolutely. "Nash will hate me when he" finds out that I lied about being widowed. And Wilton is still out "—there. He could ruin me, ruin us. You don't understand

Nash doesn't hate you, Mom," Maya told her. "He loves you very" ".much and wants you to come home

And Wilton Blackstone won't be bothering you anymore," Creed " put in firmly. "We know about the blackmail. We have proof of it, and he's been arrested. We'll see that he's punished and make ".sure he never comes near you again

He reached out to touch her, his large hand dwarfing Patricia's slender, sloping shoulder. "I give you my word, and the word of ".the entire Fortune family. We'll see that you're protected

Patricia looked at Creed and then Maya, studying their expressions for the truth in their words. Her tears had dried, her .breathing regulated and interrupted only by the occasional sniff "—But Nash"

Nash loves you," Maya said. "He could never hate you. He might " be upset that you misled him, and about your marriage not being valid, but he won't hate you. And I think that if you explain things ".to him, he'll understand

.Do you really think so?" Patricia asked in a watery voice"

Before Maya could answer, Creed said, “Absolutely. We all love you, Patricia. Let us take you home so we can show you how”.much

When they reached Sioux Falls, Patricia asked if they could stop at Maya’s house first so she could clean up before returning to .the Fortune Estate

They’d stopped at the small house in Delmont where Patricia had most recently been renting a room, to collect her meager belongings. Since her clothes were now looking quite faded and threadbare from having been worn and washed so many times during the months she’d been missing, Maya helped her find .some things from her own closet

Patricia was quiet the rest of the way home, staring out the .window and holding her hands together tightly in her lap

Maya understood her anxiety. Her mother was about to see her husband for the first time in months, having to bare her soul and admit that their marriage of thirteen years had never been legal. Her own stomach was churning; she could only imagine how .terrifying the prospect must be for Patricia

Of course, her own discomfort wasn’t due entirely to what her mother was going through right now. She was equally distracted by thoughts of the effect Patricia’s return might have on her .relationship with Creed

As much as she’d missed her mother and worried about her while she was missing, Maya had to admit she’d enjoyed the change in Creed’s attitude toward her and the time he’d been spending with her recently. But now that Patricia was back and the crisis of her disappearance was passing, there would be no reason for him to .drop by her house anymore or call just to check on her

Swallowing hard, she blinked until the stinging behind her eyes dissipated. She would miss him, miss having him in her life in a capacity other than surly stepbrother

To say nothing of how much she would miss sharing her bed with him

Creed made a right turn off the main road onto the long, circular crushed stone drive that led to the Fortune Estate. Her insides began to tighten as soon as the sprawling mansion came into view, almost as though her body sensed the sand in the hourglass of her happiness running out

When Creed pulled up in front of the house and cut the engine, they all got out and slowly walked inside without bothering to knock. Silence surrounded them, and for a moment they simply stood in the middle of the foyer, no one making a move to go farther or look to see who might be home

At her side, Patricia squeezed Maya's hand so hard, the fingers were starting to tingle

It's all right," Maya whispered, returning the pressure and " patting Patricia's arm. "Nash will understand, and Creed and I will ".stay with you the entire time, if you want us to

Creed added a supporting hand to Patricia's back as they started forward

They hadn't taken more than three or four steps when a noise at the top of the wide double stairwell caused them all to look up

Nash stood frozen on the landing, staring down at them, a look of utter shock on his face. A second later he raced the rest of the way down the stairs

Patricia! Oh, dear God, Patricia. I thought I would never see you " again

Patricia released Maya's hand and flew across the foyer, meeting Nash halfway. They kissed and hugged, both crying with delight

at being together again after such a long and stressful
.separation

Maya felt tears well in her own eyes, and sniffed to hold them at
bay. Beside her, Creed was grinning, rocking back on his heels
.with his arms linked across his chest

He knew as well as she did that there were still a few bumps in
the road ahead for her mother and his father, but right now, at
this very moment in time, there was only happiness, relief and
.cause for celebration

When Nash and Patricia finally parted, they were bleary-eyed and
.sniffing, but smiling from ear to ear

Where have you been?" Nash wanted to know, holding her by "
.the shoulders

The question made Patricia tense, and Maya took a single step
forward, ready to support her mother. But before Maya could
come to her rescue, Patricia steeled her spine and looked Nash
.straight in the eye

That's something I need to explain," she told him, "and I can "
".only hope you don't hate me afterward

Concern wrinkled Nash's brow, but his response was nothing less
.than Maya would have expected

.I could never hate you, darling," he replied adamantly"

Yes, well..." Patricia dried the undersides of her eyes with one "
thumb, then tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear. "You
might want to wait until you've heard what I have to tell you
".before deciding that for sure

Nash didn't look convinced, but Maya suspected his spirits were
.too high at having his wife safely home to argue

Let's go into the library," Patricia said, taking him by the hand "
.and leading him in that direction

Maya's feet itched to follow. Her mother had been so worried, so frightened to come clean with Nash about everything, that Maya .didn't want to leave her to face those fears alone

Now that she was home, however, Patricia seemed more herself. It had taken only one glimpse of Nash for her mother to remember the love, the dedication, the man he was and the years .they'd spent together

Whatever his reaction to what Patricia was about to tell him, Maya had no doubt that his adoration for her mother would .overshadow it all. If not immediately, then eventually

When they reached the library, Patricia turned back in her direction and offered a small smile. "Thank you for everything, ".but I'll be fine now. You two go on

Before Maya could respond, her mother closed the heavy pocket .doors, leaving her alone in the wide foyer with Creed

".Well," he said with a shrug, "I guess our job is done"

She nodded absently, her gaze still locked on the library door as though she could see through the thick wooden panel. Even though Patricia had told them it was okay to go, it didn't feel right to Maya to simply take off. Not yet. Not until she knew for sure that everything between Nash and her mother would be all .right

Taking the decision out of her hands, Creed took her by the .shoulders and physically turned her in the opposite direction

Let's get something to drink, then call the rest of the family. " ".They'll all want to know Patricia is back and okay

They made their way to the kitchen, where several members of the household staff were busy preparing dinner. Creed asked for drinks to be brought to the great room, then steered Maya in that .direction

Do you think Nash will forgive her?" she asked, standing " awkwardly in the doorway, keeping her hands in her pockets to .avoid the urge to fidget

".Yes, I do"

At the conviction in his tone, she lifted her head and met his eyes. They hit her like a ton of bricks, as always. And as always, she felt .her limbs go weak, liquid heat pooling low in her belly

If there's one thing you can be sure of," he went on, "it's that " my dad loves your mother. He may not be happy that she lied to him from the beginning, and continued to mislead him throughout ".their marriage, but he'll understand. They'll work it out

Their drinks arrived then, and Maya had to move farther into the room to get out of the servant's way as the young woman carried .a tray of iced tea to a nearby table

You use that phone," Creed said, pointing to the sleek princess " land line across the room. "I'll use my cell. We'll reach everyone "?faster if we divvy up the calls. Which ones do you want

After agreeing which Fortune family members they would each call, Maya took one of the glasses of tea and began dialing, spending the next half hour informing Creed's siblings that Patricia was home. The news was met each time with joy and relief, and every single one of the family members wanted to know where they'd found her, where she'd been and why she'd .left in the first place

Maya could hear bits and pieces of Creed's conversations, and knew he was promising them the same thing she was—that they would fill in the blanks as soon as they were all together. It certainly beat telling the same story over and over again, and until Nash and Patricia came out of the library, they weren't .confident of exactly how things would end

Twenty minutes after they finished making the phone calls, they heard car doors and then the front door slam open as Fortunes

started pouring into the house. Leaving their empty glasses to be refilled when drinks were brought for everyone, Maya and Creed .made their way back to the foyer to greet the others

Creed placed a hand at the small of her back as they walked, and Maya couldn't decide if she found the gesture comforting or .disturbing. Maybe a little of both

Comforting because she was growing used to his presence, used .to the place he'd made for himself in her life

And disturbing because she wanted so much for him to remain in .that place, even though she knew it wasn't possible

As they neared the entryway, she felt Creed's touch fall away. She missed it immediately but was sharp enough to realize that he'd pulled back because he didn't want any of the rest of the .family to notice anything out of the ordinary

It hurt, which Maya found ironic, considering that she didn't want anyone else to know they'd been involved, either. It would just .complicate matters that were already plenty complicated enough

She wanted Creed, but couldn't have him. And he didn't want her .at all, not really

Unrequited love, she was unfortunately learning, was both painful .and illogical

Sadness lying like a stone at the bottom of her stomach, she pasted a smile on her face and hugged both Gina and Case, who .were the first to arrive

Gina's face was flushed with excitement, and Maya thought she saw a tell-tale rim of red around the woman's eyes, as though she'd recently been crying. Gina wasn't a Fortune by blood—of course, neither was Maya, so they had that in common—but she'd been just as worried about Patricia's disappearance as everyone .else

She also had pregnancy hormones running rampant through her system, probably adding to the ease with which she burst into tears. According to Case, something as simple as running out of .milk could cause a near breakdown these days

Eliza and Reese, Blake and Sasha, Skylar and Zack, and Diana and Max all showed up in short order, within minutes of each other. Each time a new couple burst through the front door, it was a repeat of the first—embraces all around, damp eyes and a thousand questions about where Patricia was and what was going .on

Once things had calmed down a bit and everyone who was expected to make an appearance arrived, Creed took command, drawing everyone into the great room, calling for refreshments, then explaining the entire situation in a low, even voice. He started by telling them about the information the investigators had uncovered, followed by their own personal search for Patricia .and how they'd finally found her

He left out any mention of the time he'd spent at her house recently...or in her bed...sticking strictly to the facts of the search .and Patricia's return

The news of Maya's father still being alive and Patricia's marriage to Nash being illegal and invalid stunned them all, Maya could .tell

But just as Creed had been understanding and supportive of the situation, so were the rest, which added to her sense of relief. She didn't want anyone thinking less of her mother for something that had not only gotten its start a decade before, but that .Patricia had felt was her only option at the time

Creed finished by informing the group at large that Nash and Patricia were locked in the library, having a long-overdue .discussion and hopefully working things out between them

I don't know about you," Case said, raising his glass of pale " ".brown tea, "but I could sure go for something stronger than this

Creed, who was standing beside him gave his own glass a gentle shake, sending ice cubes clinking. With a harsh laugh, he said, "No kidding. Tell you what, when Dad comes out of that library, we'll crack open a bottle of scotch. I'm guessing he'll need a drink".by then, too

".Deal"

Without planning or conscious thought, the women gathered in one corner while the men drifted to another. Conversation was stilted and uncomfortable; they were all trying to act normal and .upbeat, but a cloud of uncertainty hung over the room

Even so, Maya was struck once again by how these people—whom she'd never felt close to before—seemed to come together as a .single unit for a mutual cause. They were, in a word, family

A lump formed in her throat as she thought of how she used to consider them cold and distant. She certainly couldn't pin those labels on them now. They were anything but aloof as they struggled to maintain a sense of regularity and put each other at .ease

?And she had to wonder: Had they changed—or had she

From the time she and her mother had moved into this giant house with the Fortunes, she'd felt like an outsider, but they definitely weren't making her feel like one now. She was one of .them, included and cared for

She took a sip of tea, as much to wash away the emotion threatening to overwhelm her as to buy a little time to put her .rapid-fire thoughts in order

Looking back now, she realized this wasn't the first time she'd been included by the Fortune siblings, made to feel as though she truly belonged. She'd simply been so used to feeling left out that she assumed she was, even when these people were trying their .best to help her fit in

No, that wasn't it, either. They weren't trying to do anything... they just were. They were treating her like family because to .them she was family

A wave of love and appreciation washed over her so keenly she .nearly fumbled the glass in her hands

They were family, and she was a part of it. They were her family, and she loved each and every one of them with a strength and devotion she hadn't even realized she possessed until this .moment

.It was a revelation, and she thanked God for it

If only her relationship with Creed could be as quickly and easily resolved, but she had a feeling that would take twenty years to .puzzle itself out, too

She was about to sigh with resignation when the entire room went quiet as a tomb. Noticing the direction of the others' gazes, .she turned to find Nash and Patricia standing in the doorway

Her mother's face was streaked with tears, and Nash's eyes were bleary, as though he, too, had been crying. Their hands were .joined, she noticed, which had to be a good sign

All the same, Maya held her breath, waiting to hear what they .would say

Nash cleared his throat. I'm glad you're all here," he said.
".“Patricia and I have some things we need to tell you

The good news was that Nash and Patricia were going to be all right. Nash had been more upset with Patricia for running away instead of trusting him enough to tell him the truth than he was that she'd lied to him to begin with. She was now strictly forbidden from ever keeping anything from him again, to which .she'd chuckled and tearily agreed

Once the family had been assured that everything was okay and life would likely be returning to normal, they'd celebrated in true Fortune style. Bottles of wine and scotch had been uncorked and passed around, and platters of cookies and cakes and other finger foods had been served

Creed took another long swallow of the hundred-year-old Scotch that was his father's favorite, letting it burn a trail down his throat

He should be relieved. Hell, he should be celebrating right along with everyone else.... God knew he had more to be grateful for. Not only for Patricia's safe return and an end to the mystery of where she'd run off to for so long, but his freedom from whatever spell Maya had woven around him the past few weeks

There wasn't a hope in hell of breaking free of the spell she'd cast over him for the past twenty years, but after sating his initial passions with Maya, he'd only continued seeing her, continued sleeping with her, because she'd needed someone

.That's what he'd told himself, anyway

He'd also told himself that as soon as Patricia was safe and sound back home, he'd put an end to his secret, clandestine affair with her daughter

Well, they'd found Patricia and brought her home, so that's exactly what he intended to do

All might not be perfect or completely settled, but it was good enough that Maya didn't need him anymore. With her mother back, and the truth of Wilton's blackmail out in the open, she was no longer vulnerable, no longer worried, no longer in need of a strong shoulder to lean on

.Or anything else he might have to offer

This was good. Better than good; it was great. It had been the plan all along

.Now all he had to do was stick to it

.And he would, although his body seemed to have other ideas

While everyone else was crowded around Patricia, welcoming her home and promising to stand by her through thick and thin, he'd made the mistake of glancing in Maya's direction. She'd been watching the scene, her eyes sparkling with emotion, the hint of a smile on her lips

It was the first time he'd ever seen her look quite like that around his family. Serene, at ease...happy

He wanted to think it was her expression that had stirred him, but he knew it was much more than that. She stirred him. Her strength, her poise, her quiet beauty. All the same qualities that had stirred him from the time she'd hit puberty, maybe earlier

But now he knew so much more about her. He knew what she looked like naked and the noises she made in the throes of passion. He knew what made her toes curl, her nipples pucker and her eyes flutter closed on a sigh of ecstasy

.He knew, and he damn well couldn't forget. Would never forget

.Which was only going to make walking away that much harder

He tossed back the last of the scotch, hoping it would dull the ache throbbing at his temples and his gut

Walking away wouldn't be easy, but then, he'd known that from the start

Just like living under the same roof with her all these years hadn't been easy. He'd watched her grow up; watched her blossom; watched her fail and succeed, make mistakes and soldier through them. It hadn't been easy to be forced to see her on a regular basis, even after they'd both moved away from the Fortune Estate, and to be slapped in the face with the fact that she was family—his stepsister, for God's sake—when he wished she could be so much more

It was enough to make a man want to crawl into a bottle and ...never come out. And since his glass was currently empty

He pushed himself up from the wing chair where he'd been sitting, listening with only half an ear to the conversations going on around him, and headed to the bar for a refill. Just as he was recapping the bottle of hundred-year-old scotch, Blake sauntered .up

Creed tipped the bottle in his half brother's direction and lifted a .brow, silently asking if Blake wanted some before he put it away

No, thanks, I'll stick with what I've got," Blake said, gesturing " .with his still-full glass

Creed replaced the scotch in its spot amongst the other assorted bottles on the bar, then took a sip while he waited for Blake to say whatever was on his mind. And from the look on his face, it .was obvious there was something

I thought you should know that my mom has managed to lasso " herself another rich husband," Blake told him, speaking of his mother and Nash's second wife, Trina Watters Fortune. "They're jetting off to Europe as soon as the ink is dry on the marriage ".license

I guess that's good news," Creed said. "At least she seems to " have given up on trying to get Dad back and will be out of ".everyone's hair over there

Blake nodded grimly, taking a drink before continuing. "Look, I want to apologize for the mess she made of everyone's lives. I didn't want to believe she was capable of some of the things she was doing, but, well...I was wrong, and I'm sorry I didn't see that ".sooner

Apology accepted," Creed replied easily. "But only if you'll " accept mine for making you pay for Trina's manipulations. You weren't responsible for your mother's actions, even though I treated you as though you were." Regret narrowed his eyes and

thinned his lips. "You can't know how sorry I am for that, and I hope you can forgive me. I'd like for us to start over and be real brothers from now on." Glancing over at Nash, his other brother, and his brothers-in-law, along with the women who had just begun to trickle back into the room, Creed offered a small smile. ". "A man can never have too much family

For a second Blake didn't reply. Then he cleared his throat and held out his hand. "I'd like that," he said, his voice rough with ".feeling. "A lot

Creed shifted his drink to the opposite hand so they could shake on it. Before letting go, though, he couldn't resist giving his .younger brother a last, serious warning

One more thing," he said, his tone somber as he tightened his " ".grip. "You'd better take good care of Sasha

Even though they'd spent a good amount of time dating, Creed had never really had a romantic interest in Sasha Kilgore. They'd gone out and pretended to be seriously involved only to keep .other, cloying women away from him

She'd done him a favor in that, and they were friends. Good .friends. He didn't want to see anything happen to her

Not that he thought Blake would ever do anything to intentionally hurt his new fiancée. Blake was entirely too smitten with the .gorgeous redhead

.Creed couldn't blame him, but a word of caution was still in order

She's a hell of a woman," he continued. "She deserves only the " best, and if you make her cry, I'll have to pound you. That's what ".big brothers do

Don't worry," Blake said, casting a glance at Sasha as she " entered into the room carrying a tray of hastily made hors .d'oeuvres

She was grinning broadly at something Skylar had said, waddling along pregnantly at her side, and Blake's eyes filled with a glint that could only be described as complete and total adoration. "I".intend to take very good care of her

Creed lifted his drink to his mouth to cover a smile. "Glad to hear".it

For the record," Blake said, dragging his gaze from the woman " he loved, "I think Maya is a pretty terrific woman, too. She'd be good for you, if only you'd see it and take the initiative to do ".something about it

Creed froze, the scotch in his mouth trickling a burning path down his throat as he struggled to swallow and then breathe. When he finally managed, it was with a cough, and his voice was strained .when he tried to speak

.What are you talking about?" he demanded"

I know," Blake said, shaking his head, "we're all supposed to " pretend we don't know that you're attracted to her. Unfortunately, no one in this family is blind. We've all seen the way you look at her, and though we've never talked about it, I think everyone would agree that it's time you stop moping ".around, watching her from afar, and just went for it

A low throb was beginning to pound behind Creed's eye sockets. ". "Don't be ridiculous," he snapped. "She's our sister

Stepsister," Blake corrected. "Related only by Dad's marriage to " Patricia, which is no true relation at all. And, hell, it turns out they're not even married now. You need to stop worrying so much about that sort of thing and focus on what's important. If you care about her—and I think you do—then you need to do something about it. Toss her over your shoulder and drag her to bed, then marry her before some other lucky bastard beats you to the ".punch. She'd make you a great wife

Blake chuckled and took a small sip of his drink. "Think of it this way," he added. "At least you don't have to suffer through the misery of meeting her parents and introducing her to your own. Or dealing with in-laws. That's all a done deal, and we know and ".love her already

With that Blake drained his glass, set it down on the sideboard .and walked away to join Sasha

Creed stood there, watching as his brother slipped a hand around his fiancée's waist and leaned in to press a kiss to her temple. Sasha tipped her head to smile up at him, utter happiness shining .in her green eyes and emanating from every pore of her body

Blake's words echoed through his head, making the pounding .even worse and keeping time with the frenetic beat of his heart

He stood there for what seemed like forever, observing all the couples in the room. And suddenly he was envious. Everyone had .someone. Everyone was happily married, or on their way to it .Everyone, that was, except him

He'd never thought of himself as being the marrying kind before, never thought in terms of a serious, lasting relationship or settling down with one woman. The woman, who seemed to suit him like no other, who fit into his life and his world as comfortably .as an old pair of jeans

.But he wanted it, he realized

It was like a flash of lightning in the night sky, hitting him hard .and fast right in the solar plexus

.He wanted that, and he wanted it with Maya

Ten

C reed was unusually quiet on the drive home, and since Maya was both physically exhausted and emotionally drained from the

day's events, she was more than happy to remain silent herself. She let her head rest against the back of the seat and watched the scenery outside the side window, hoping the tension running through her body didn't show

The trip back to her house also gave her time to decide exactly how to tell Creed it was over. Whatever had been going on between them these past few weeks, she needed to break it off, be done with it, stop letting him tie her up in knots

She'd been wondering what would happen to this so-called relationship they'd been having, until she'd looked over at him earlier this evening during the celebration of her mother's return. Glancing in his direction, she'd caught him watching her. The look in his blue eyes had sent her heart rate into triple digits, but it hadn't lasted long

He'd blinked, and the heat was gone, replaced by a cool, impassive expression. Arching one dark brow, he'd lifted his glass of scotch to his lips and turned away

It was the same way he used to look at her, the same way he used to act toward and around her. So it seemed that whatever had passed between them these past few weeks wasn't going to grow, wasn't going to blossom into something deep and meaningful

That's when she'd realized she needed to call it quits...while she still had her dignity and a chance to put the pieces of her upside-down life back together

She might not like it, and it wasn't how she would have chosen to have things turn out, but she also wasn't surprised. Whatever had compelled him to take her to bed in the first place was obviously temporary, as she'd known it would be

It was probably even for the best. Now maybe she could move on, get her life back to some semblance of order and possibly develop

a normal relationship with another man, crossing Creed Fortune
.off her list of even the most remote of possibilities

And she was going to do it before he had the chance. The end was
near, she could feel it, but she would be damned if she'd stand
there and let him tell her all the reasons they couldn't be
.together anymore, all the reasons it would never work

Ten minutes later Creed pulled the Mercedes up to the curb in
front of her darkened town house and cut the engine. Without
waiting for him to come around to her door, she got out and
.started up the steps, relieved when he followed her

She stepped inside and flipped on a light, waiting for him to close
.the door behind him

He didn't approach her, for which she was grateful. If he'd stalked
toward her with that look in his eyes that said he couldn't wait to
strip her bare and make love to her again, she wasn't sure she'd
have been able to stand her ground and make him listen to what
.she'd decided she had to say

But he simply stood there, just inside the closed front door, and
.watched her

Setting her purse on the kitchen table, she wrapped her fingers
around the back of one of the chairs for added support and said,
".“Thank you for all your help in finding my mother

His expression didn't change, but he nodded almost
".imperceptibly. “You're welcome

She swallowed, forcing herself to press on. “Creed, there's
".something I need to tell you

His gaze flickered slightly, his eyes going a shade darker, but he
.said nothing, waiting for her to continue

I don't think we should see each other anymore.” She said the “
words in a rush, needing to get them out before her courage
.failed her

She didn't know what type of reaction she'd been expecting from him, but it hadn't been complete silence. An argument maybe, or a creatively muttered curse. Instead, a muscle jumped in his jaw .and he crossed his arms over his chest as he stared at her

We both know we've just been...passing time," she told him " when the silence stretched out between them, jumbling her already strained nerves. "It was never going to last, and now that my mother is home, there's no need to continue spending time together. We'd only be...fooling ourselves and drawing unwanted ".attention

Seconds ticked past while she waited for him to respond. She .would take anything—a shout, a shrug, a string of expletives

Eyes narrowed and mouth set, he dropped his arms, then said, ".“You're probably right

Her stomach tightened at his calm acquiescence. She hadn't realized until that very moment that she wanted him to fight for her. Argue with her, yell at her, demand she not give up on them .so easily

.Declare his undying love

But, of course, that was never going to happen. She should simply be glad he wasn't going to make this any harder on her than it .already was

.I guess I'll see you, then," he said, turning to open the door“

She nodded, taking a step forward as though to see him out, even .though there was no need

I promised my mom I'd attend Sunday dinner at the estate," she " told him, then wanted to kick herself for letting him think she was .counting the hours until she would see him again

He stared at her a moment before inclining his head and walking .away

Closing the door behind him, she watched through the window as he walked down the sidewalk and around the hood of his car to slide in behind the wheel. Her lungs hitched, and she felt a tell-tale prickling of tears, but she didn't cry. If anything, she felt .numb

Breaking things off had been the right move. The only move, really, considering his lack of emotion about their relationship .and the complete impossibility of a future for them

But the young woman in her wept for the loss of a decade-long dream of true love, while the adult woman hardened her heart .and steeled her spine to face a lifetime of loneliness

Almost a week passed while Creed fluctuated between being relieved that Maya had ended things when she did...and being .furious that she'd cast him aside so carelessly

Hadn't he just begun to think that maybe he was ready to settle down and to do it with Maya? Not two hours before, hadn't he decided to sit her down and tell her flat-out that he thought they should continue seeing each other and find out where it would ?lead them

Then she'd pulled the rug right out from under him by telling him she didn't want to see him anymore. That whatever they'd had .was fun while it lasted, but she was ready to put it behind her

At first he'd thought it was for the best. Had even been grateful he hadn't had to come up with the words to tell her much the .same

But the longer they were apart, the harder he tried to put the pieces of his life back to the way they'd been before he'd given in to temptation and taken Maya to bed, the less appreciative he .became

**He missed her, dammit. Missed seeing her, talking with her...
.making love to her**

**And as much as he'd fought it, he was no longer certain he
wanted things to return to the way they'd been. He didn't want to
see her at the estate, at Sunday dinners, and pretend she was
nothing more than family, when he could close his eyes and
picture her standing naked before him. Or feel the silk of her
.bronzed skin beneath his fingertips**

**He ended up firing his receptionist twice while his brain tried to
make sense of what he was feeling. Thankfully, she was used to
his moods—which sometimes turned black and foul during
.business dealings, too—and chose to ignore him**

**It was Case, though, who finally came to his office and told him to
snap out of it. He suggested rather strongly that Creed either do
something about whatever was making him such a bloody bear to
.deal with lately or get over it and stop being an ass**

**Creed wasn't sure how to go about doing either, but he knew his
.brother was right**

**Leaving work early, he went up to his apartment on the top floor
of the Dakota Fortune office building and changed out of his
standard business suit to a pair of tan chinos and a dark blue
.shirt**

**Even though it was a bit early to start imbibing, he fixed himself a
good, stiff drink of bourbon, then wandered restlessly around the
penthouse. His blood felt too hot for his veins, simmering just
.below the surface, threatening to boil over**

**The alcohol now sitting at the bottom of his stomach didn't help,
either. Instead of calming him, it seemed to put him more on
.edge**

**With a curse, he set his almost-full highball glass on a nearby
credenza and grabbed his keys. Riding the elevator down to the**

underground parking garage, he climbed into his Mercedes and
.passed through the security gate onto the street

He hadn't intended to drive to Maya's house, hadn't consciously
thought to aim the car in that direction. But a few minutes later
.he found himself cruising down her block

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, twisting against the
leather until his knuckles turned white. His stomach churned
again, but this time it had nothing to do with the few sips of
.bourbon he'd consumed

He eased to the curb, coming to a stop behind another car parked
directly in front of Maya's town house. The black Lexus looked
.familiar, but he couldn't place it

Cutting the engine, he sat there as the seconds ticked by, staring
at her closed front door. He considered getting out of the car,
walking up and ringing the doorbell, but he had no practical
reason for being there. If anything, he should be avoiding her,
.except when that was impossible because of family functions

But damned if he didn't want to see her again. Feel the satiny
strands of her hair between his fingertips, smell the light,
feminine scent that seemed to invade his pores whenever he was
.around her

His hand was on the ignition—whether to turn the key or pull it
out and take it with him, he wasn't sure—when Maya's front door
.opened and a man stepped out

Brad McKenzie. And Maya was close on his heels, her hand resting
.lightly on his arm

Creed saw red. Heat crawled up his neck and burned in his gut.
.His hands balled into fists

?What was that bastard doing here

.With Maya

.Touching her

**He was out of the car before he'd completed the thought, his vision still blurred with fury, his knuckles itching to make contact
.with the other man's jaw**

**His strides ate up the yard or two of sidewalk between him and
.where Brad and Maya now stood**

**What the hell are you doing here?" he charged, startling both of "
.them into spinning in his direction**

.Creed," Maya began"

**But his attention was focused on Brad, whose own gaze narrowed
.and darkened when he saw Creed barreling toward him**

**He recognized that expression—it was the look of a possessive
.man. A man who wanted to stake his claim, mark his territory**

.And that territory was Maya

**Well, he couldn't have her. As far as Creed was concerned, she was already spoken for, and McKenzie could go take a flying leap.
.Over a very steep cliff, if he had his way**

**Before another word could be uttered, Creed had McKenzie by the shirtfront, pushing him back a couple of steps as he raised his
.right arm, ready to throw the first punch**

**What are you doing?" Maya shouted, her eyes round with terror "
as she threw herself in front of Brad, shoving both hands at
.Creed's chest**

**With Maya in the way, he couldn't pound the other man as he'd have liked. He lowered his arm but kept his hand balled in
.McKenzie's shirt**

**Stop it," Maya demanded, still pushing at his chest and now "
yanking at his arm to get him to let go of McKenzie. "Stop it,
".Creed, I mean it**

For long minutes time stood still. The muscles in Creed's arms bulged, and his teeth ground together. McKenzie didn't make a move against him, was just standing there. But he didn't look intimidated or afraid. If anything, he looked as if he'd enjoy it if .Creed hit him, so he'd have an excuse to hit him back

Taking a deep breath, Creed loosened his hold and dropped his arm to his side. Maya inserted herself more fully between them, and he retreated half a step to give her more room and keep her .from being pressed up against Brad

She was breathing heavily, her eyes flashing fire. But instead of laying into him, she stared at him for a moment, then turned to .face McKenzie

".I'm sorry, Brad, but I think you should go"

The man stood perfectly still for a beat, his gaze remaining locked .on Creed. Then his eyes flicked to Maya and he nodded

".I'll talk to you later," he said softly"

As soon as Brad was in his black Lexus and driving away, Maya hit .Creed square in the chest

"?What is wrong with you"

".What the hell was he doing here?" he growled in response"

That's none of your business." Crossing her arms over her chest, " .she turned and headed back to the house

It damn well is my business," he told her, dogging her every " .step

She didn't try to slam the door in his face, which surprised him. Instead she moved to the middle of the kitchen before twisting to face him, leaving him to slam the door himself after he'd stepped .in behind her

"?Why? Why is it your business"

Because,” he answered, his temper flaring before he’d fully “
”.formed his response. “It just is

No, Creed,” she said, her voice turning low and calm. “It really “
”.isn’t

A shiver of dread ran through him, turning his blood icy as he
watched her turn and walk out of the kitchen through the second
.entryway that led to the dining room and the rest of the house

He’d spent the last decade pretending he didn’t care about her
and was pretty sure he’d spend the next decade kicking himself
for all the time he’d wasted, all the time they’d lost because of his
.stubbornness and stupidity

”.Maya, wait“

He caught up to her at the base of the stairs and had to fight not
.to grab her up then and there

It would have been a simple matter to wrap his fingers around her
arm and drag her to him as his gut was urging him to do. But he
didn’t think he-man tactics were what the situation called for.
He’d used quite enough of those over the past few weeks, and
while they’d gotten him into Maya’s bed, he didn’t think they
.would win her over for a lifetime

Sticking his hands deep into his front pockets to keep from
”?reaching for her, he asked, “Do you want McKenzie? Is that it

With a sigh she said, “I don’t know what I want. Brad’s a nice guy.
He really cared about me. But I’ve treated him terribly, and your
”.little display of aggression out there certainly didn’t help

She rolled her eyes at him before continuing. “Which is why I was
breaking up with him. He came over so we could talk, but I think
we both knew we were never going to be more than friends. I
don’t think I’ll ever be able to be more than friends with any man,
”.thanks to you

”?Her already-stiff posture turned even more rigid. “Happy now

".It didn't take him a heartbeat to respond. "Yes

**Huffing out an angry, frustrated breath, she spun around and
.started to stomp up the steps**

".Don't you want to know why I'm happy?" he called after her"

".No, I really don't"

He followed her, climbing the stairs slowly, one at a time.

.Determination marked his every move

**She'd reached her bedroom, slamming the door behind her in an
effort to shut him out, but he didn't let that stop him. Twisting
.the knob, he opened the door again and stepped inside**

**Maya was on the other side of the room, standing with her back to
him as she rummaged around in her closet, making an obvious
.effort to ignore him. Not that it was going to work**

**I'm in love with you," he said, the apprehension in his belly "
.easing slightly when she froze in midmotion**

**I'm glad you broke things off with McKenzie. And I'm glad I've "
ruined you for other men if it means you'll be more likely to stay
".with me**

**Seconds ticked past while he waited for her reaction, his lungs
burning with the need for oxygen while he held his breath. Slowly
she lowered her arm from where she'd been reaching for a top
.shelf of the closet and turned to face him**

**You don't really want me," she said, licking her lips to help get "
the words out. "You only slept with me to get me out of your
"?system, remember**

**I remember everything. Including the fact that I've wanted you "
since you started to change from a spindly kid to a full-grown
".woman**

**That's not true," she charged, her voice wavering. "You barely "
".knew I existed**

Oh, I knew. I treated you pretty badly back then—ignoring you a “ lot of the time, teasing you, censuring you. I was a jerk. I know that, and I’m sorry about it. My only excuse is that I wanted you. Even then, when you were too damn young to know the difference .and I was definitely old enough to know better

I shouldn’t have been attracted to you, though, and the guilt and “ frustration of the entire situation made me angry. More often than not, I took that anger out on you. I was a moody bastard, that’s for sure,” he said with a harsh laugh. “And I made your life ”.miserable

”.Yes,” she choked out, still looking shocked and numb, “you did“

That was a long time ago, though. And now we’ve got this...” He “ waved a hand between them, indicating some invisible thread that seemed to tie them together, keep them bound, even when they each tried their best to break away. “Connection. This insatiable hunger for each other that isn’t going away, no matter ”.how much we might wish it would

You make me crazy,” she said, shaking her head. Her lashes “ fluttered and her chest hitched slightly as she drew a breath. “You claim to be in love with me, then say you wish you weren’t. You tell me you’ve wanted me for years, but until recently you acted like I was nothing more than a thorn in your side. Which is ”.it, Creed? I’d really like to know so I can move on with my life

He grinned at the sassy remark and took a step forward. Then .another, until he was close enough to grasp her by the shoulders

That night a few weeks ago,” he began. “You reminded me on “ the phone of the night when you were seventeen and I caught that boy trying to take advantage of you in the back seat of his car. I said some things after that—some nasty, hurtful things that you’ve been carrying around with you ever since. But I want you ”.to know I didn’t mean them

His thumbs moved in small circles on the flesh of her upper arms, .left bare by her short-sleeved top

None of it. I was furious that anyone would dare touch you like “that, treat you like that. I wanted to kill that kid,” he snarled, one corner of his mouth curling upward the way it had all those years .ago

I was also sick with jealousy that you were dating at all. Because “at the same time I didn’t want any other boys near you, I couldn’t come clean about wanting to be with you myself. But I’m older now, and I know what I want. I also know what I’m willing to risk ”.to have it

His grip on her arms tightened and he dragged her closer, until .she was pressed to his chest, her face only inches from his own

I was so damn worried about what others would think and with “protecting the Fortune family’s reputation, that I almost let you get away. But I don’t care about any of that anymore. I love you ”.and want you to marry me

He paused for a moment, sliding his hands from her shoulders to her temples, running his fingers through her hair and tipping her .head back to meet her sparkling eyes

.And I think you should,” he added with a cocky grin“

Maya’s heart was pounding so hard inside her chest, she thought it might explode. She’d never thought to hear anything close to I love you from this man, let alone what amounted to a marriage .proposal

And as much as she wanted to stay mad at him for all he’d put her through—not only these past weeks, but the past years—she couldn’t. She loved him, too. Truly, madly, deeply, and until the .end of time

He might drive her to distraction at times, but she’d been ready to love him quietly and from afar, just as she always had. Now he was giving her the chance to scream it from the rooftops. And, .more, he was telling her he felt the same about her

Suddenly her eyes filled with tears, and she took a deep, gulping .breath, fighting to keep her pulse from galloping out of control

Of course I'll marry you," she said in a watery voice, her cheeks "growing damp as her emotions spilled over. "I've always loved you, and it killed me to think you'd never see me as anything ".more than your annoying, unwanted younger stepsister

You were always wanted," he told her, his own eyes turning "suspiciously bright a second before he pulled her to him and crushed her in his firm embrace. "Believe me. I've spent the better part of my life doing my level best not to let anyone see ".how very much I did want you

She cried into his shoulder for a moment, pure happiness bubbling inside her until it overflowed. "I wish you had said something sooner, instead of making me miserable all these ".years

Leaning back, she fixed him with as stern a look as she could .manage while all her dreams were coming true

Why didn't you?" she demanded, slapping him in the chest. "Even if you couldn't bring yourself to say anything before, you certainly could have said something when we started sleeping ".together

He shook his head, a wry smile curving his lips. "Definitely not. I was still deep in denial and only sleeping with you to get you out "?of my system, remember

She arched one dark brow, fighting the laughter that threatened "?to burst past her lips. "Did it work

Not by a long shot. You were under my skin long before the first "time I let myself touch you. But after that, the more I had you, the ".more I wanted you

He ran his fingers through her hair again, wiping the trails of .wetness from her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs

**I'll always want you, Maya," he said softly. "And now that I know"
".you love me, too, I'm never going to let you go**

**She leaned into him again, her hands at his waist as she absorbed
"?his warmth, strength and love. "Promise**

**Promise," he whispered, then captured her mouth for a searing "
.kiss**

**When they broke apart, they were both struggling for air. Her
fingers bunched in the material of his shirt while his ran down her
.back to cup the curve of her bottom**

**We're going to have quite an announcement to make at Sunday "
dinner with the family, aren't we?" he said, his hands caressing
everywhere they could reach while his lips nibbled at her throat
.and the sensitive hollow behind her ear**

**Mmm-hmm. How do you think they'll handle it?" she asked, the "
smallest trickle of worry wending its way through her bubble of
.contentment**

**Creed lifted his head to gaze down at her, his eyes serious. "I
think they'll be surprised, but they're Fortunes—they'll handle it. I
also think they'll be happy for us, despite what the media and the
".outside world might make of our relationship**

**She thought about that for a moment, then began to grin. "I think
".so, too. I can't wait to tell them**

**With an arm around her waist, he lifted her off her feet and
turned for the bed. "Neither can I, but since Sunday's a couple
days off and we just happen to have this nice, soft bed in front of
".us, I say we make good use of it**

**Oh, by all means," she replied in as serious a tone as she could "
.manage while pure joy coursed through her veins**

**Creed tossed her onto the wide mattress, following her down and
covering her body with his own. And all she could think was that it
had been a bumpy road, with more than a few potholes and**

**pitfalls, but at long last she was exactly where she'd always
.wanted to be**

**She was finally perfectly and deliriously happy, and knew she
.would remain that way. Forever**

Epilogue

One Year Later

**A toast!" Creed moved around the room, topping off glasses of "
.champagne from the bottle in his hand**

**Uh-uh, none for you, love," he said with a smile, setting down "
the bottle and handing Maya, who sat on a nearby chair, a glass
of punch instead. Before straightening, he leaned in to press a
kiss to her forehead and pat the bulge of her hugely pregnant
.belly**

**She was so big now she felt ready to explode. Her husband,
however, seemed to love it. He would lie in bed at night, stroking
her giant beach ball of a stomach and talking to the baby growing
.inside**

**And anytime she complained about her size, her waddle or the
inability to find clothes that both looked good and fit her, he was
always quick to tell her how beautiful she was and to remind her
that soon—very soon now, since she was a couple of weeks
overdue—they would have an adorable baby boy or girl to show
.for all her discomforts**

**Truth be told, she couldn't wait. She was scared and nervous and
.anxious, but also happy and excited**

This baby would be a living, breathing tribute to her love for Creed, and his for her, and hopefully possess traits that exemplified the best of them both

They'd been married less than a year, and as Creed had predicted, the press had had a field day when their engagement was announced. He had been wrong about their relationship causing a scandal, however

The papers and gossip magazines had certainly tried to make a big deal of their being brother and sister, but once it had come out that their only family connection was through the marriage of his father to her mother, with no blood ties between them, the entire story had died down and disappeared within a few weeks

And, frankly, the Fortune family had begun to get used to the bevy of stories floating around about them, since the frenzy had been going on fairly regularly from the time Nash's and Patricia's lack of a legal marriage certificate had become public knowledge

They'd had a beautiful, if somewhat hurriedly planned wedding, and flown off to Jamaica for a luxury honeymoon

That's where she'd gotten pregnant, to everyone's surprise and delight. Now, if only their reluctant child would decide to make an appearance

To Dad and Patricia," Creed continued, breaking into her " thoughts as he raised his glass and his voice. "May you forever be as happy as you are at this moment, and may this marriage be ".valid, legal and last forever

Chuckles spilled through the room, everyone in attendance aware of the circumstances surrounding today's events

Maya's father, Wilton Blackstone, had been sent to prison for extortion, thanks to Nash and the boys throwing the considerable weight of the Fortune name and reputation behind his prosecution. Knowing that any luck he'd been having had come to

a firm and final end, Wilton had also been more than willing to .grant Patricia a divorce

Soon after, Nash and Patricia had started planning a second wedding, where their vows would not only be renewed, but .finally, truly legalized

It had been one of the most talked-about events of the season in Sioux Falls, overshadowing even Creed's and Maya's nuptials, and everyone who was anyone in South Dakota and beyond wanted to .attend

But Patricia and Nash hadn't wanted a big or flashy wedding, especially this time around. They'd trimmed the guest list down to include only family and a few close friends, and now only immediate family remained, gathering in the great room for a .private celebration

Case and Gina were there, of course, with their six-month-old son, Clive. He was the most adorable thing Maya had ever seen, and she couldn't wait to have one of her own to bounce on her knee .and dress in cute little outfits

Skylar and Zack were also in attendance, making a habit of splitting their time between their home in New Zealand and the Fortune estate so nine-month-old Amanda could grow up knowing .her grandparents and cousins

Max and Diana had also flown all the way from Australia for the occasion, and had dropped hints that they were thinking about .starting a family soon, as well

.Here, here!" everyone agreed in response to Creed's toast"

Patricia laughed, passing her glass of champagne to Nash as little Amanda stretched out her arms, wiggling in her mother's hold as she reached for her grandmother. With a roll of her eyes, Skylar .handed her daughter over

Maya couldn't wait to see her mother holding her child like that, but she was happy just to see the contentment on Patricia's face these days. It certainly beat the strain and pallor she'd worn for so long before her first husband had been dealt with and put .firmly out of their lives

Eliza, who was sporting a slight pregnancy bulge of her own, stepped forward and cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. Reese stood with her, both with kooky, crooked smiles .curving their lips

I don't know if this is the right time to make this " announcement," she said, "but Reese and I wanted to share the "...news that

Her smile widened as she glanced at her husband. He lifted her hand to his mouth, taking over when she didn't seem capable of finishing. His voice was lower and a bit more controlled, but his .pleasure was obvious in the brightness of his eyes

".We just found out we're having twins"

Cheers and ecstatic exclamations filled the room as everyone rushed forward to congratulate them. Maya shifted back and forth, working to hoist herself up from her seat, which was .becoming increasingly difficult these days

I've got you," Creed said, appearing at her side to relieve her of " .her punch glass and pull her to her feet

.Thank you," she said a little breathlessly"

You're welcome. Now smile," he cajoled, slipping an arm around " the spot formerly known as her waist, "or you'll send poor Eliza ".into a panic over having to carry two of these

The idea of being twice as pregnant as she already was sent Maya into a bit of a panic herself, so she did as Creed suggested and planted a wide smile on her face as she waddled forward to add .her congratulations to the rest

After things had calmed down, Nash placed his hands on his hips and focused his gaze on Blake and Sasha, who were cuddled close together, still acting like the newlyweds that they were

So,” he said, rocking back on his heels. “Everyone else is taken “”?care of. When are you two planning to start a family

Sasha blushed to the roots of her auburn hair, but Blake merely shook his head at his father’s pushy antics

“Give us a break,” Blake told him, “we just got married“

“...And“

Blake rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, we’ll get started on grandkids for you soon enough, I promise. Not that you don’t have enough to keep you busy for a while,” he added, cocking his head at all the babies and pregnant bellies in the room

There’s no such thing as too many grandbabies,” Nash persisted,“ his tone gruff despite the happiness of his expression

Just as the group of Fortunes started to break away, heading for the different chairs and sofas in the room and refilling glasses, a sharp pain slashed low through Maya’s abdomen and around her back

Oh!” she cried, reaching for Creed, who was right there beside “ her

He took her hand, lines of concern bracketing his mouth. “What is “?it? Are you all right

It took her a moment to catch her breath and straighten. “Yes, “—I’m fine. I think

Another pain hit, and she knew she wasn’t all right. It suddenly occurred to her that maybe the ache she’d had in her back the past couple of days and all of today hadn’t been just another fun side effect of her pregnancy, but was actually a sign that the baby’s arrival was imminent

Clutching her belly, as well as Creed's hand, she said, "I think we're about to add another member to the brood of ".grandbabies

Chaos broke out around them, but Creed simply swooped her into .his arms and strode from the room

I can walk, Creed," she complained, knowing she must weigh a " .ton

Hush. I'm carrying my very pregnant wife to the car so we can " ".drive to the hospital and have a baby. Don't argue

Considering the tightness at her waist and the throb in her lower back, she decided to keep her mouth shut and let him get her to .the hospital as quickly as possible

Behind them, the entire Fortune clan poured out of the house, rushing to their respective cars, strapping babies into car seats .and calling out words of encouragement

Maya took a moment to smile over the flood of family that was about to descend on the local hospital...and felt more than a modicum of sympathy for the staff there, who would likely be .harassed and harangued within an inch of their lives

We'll be right behind you, darling," her mother promised, " leaning into the car as Creed settled her into the passenger seat and fitted the safety belt around her wide girth. "Don't worry ".about a thing. We love you

She kissed the tips of her fingers, then placed them on Maya's brow before stepping back and letting Creed slam the door .closed

.Maya's eyes filled with tears and she sniffed
".Hey"

She turned her head to look at her husband. He started the engine and put the car in gear before reaching over to take her .hand

Don't cry. I'm nervous enough as it is, and just barely managing " ".to hold it together. If you lose it, we're in trouble

As always, he knew just what to say. She chuckled and squeezed .his hand

".I won't lose it," she promised quietly. "And I'm nervous, too"

We'll get through it together, okay? We've also got a hell of a lot" of backup," he remarked, sparing a glance for the rearview mirror, where she suspected a procession of Fortune vehicles was .trailing behind them

At the end of the long driveway, he stopped and turned to face .her

In case things get crazy once we get to the hospital," he said, "I " want you to know that I love you. I've never once been sorry that ".I threw caution to the wind and took you as my wife

She blinked and held her breath, fighting the wash of tears that threatened to spill over. "I love you, too. But if you keep talking ".like that, I might break down, after all

He simply smiled, then leaned over to kiss her firmly on the ".mouth. "Okay. Let's go have a baby

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FORTUNE'S FORBIDDEN WOMAN

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